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STRATEGIC STUDY

THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE RESCUE MISSION

A CASE STUDY

by

WILLIAM M. STEELE, [redacted]
LIEUTENANT COLONEL, USA

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IN

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Research Supervisor: Colonel Samuel B. Gardiner, USAF

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STRATEGIC STUDIES REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission. A Case Study.

AUTHOR: William M. Steele, Lieutenant Colonel, USA

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The case study provides information on the background, planning, and execution of the rescue attempt. Analysis of the critical problems identified subsequent to the operation is also included. This analysis addresses the complexity of the operation, OPSEC emphasis, intelligence requirements, plans review procedures, joint training, joint task force (JTF) organization, command and control, leadership, JTF readiness, and pilot selection.

The study concludes that mission failure can be traced to poor decisions made by senior military and civilian leadership.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel William M. Steele, USA, graduated from The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, in 1967 and earned his graduate degree in management from Webster College in 1979. An Infantryman, he has commanded at the platoon, company, and battalion levels. His career has been spent in light infantry and airborne troop units located in Europe, Viet Nam, Alaska, and the continental United States. He is a graduate of the Infantry Officers' Advanced Course and the Army's Command and General Staff College. Lieutenant Colonel Steele is presently a student at The National War College, Class of 1984.

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CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND

Tuesday, 20 January 1981; a day of historical beginning and end! In Washington, D.C., citizens watched intently as Ronald Wilson Reagan was administered the oath of office as our nation's fortieth President. The Republican Party returned to power. Their platform promised economic growth, increases in military strength and readiness, and a balanced budget. The inauguration ceremony represented the culmination of a unique political debate. The campaign between the incumbent, President Carter, and the republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, was waged over the entire spectrum of political issues. Yet, it remained unique because the election was not won or lost over typical issues. Rather, it was decided by a religious zealot in a country eight thousand miles from our nation's capital; a country torn by revolution and civil unrest, without a viable government or an announced foreign policy. The country - - IRAN! The religious zealot - - **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini!**

Fourteen months before President Reagan's inauguration, The New York Times carried the following report:

TEHERAN STUDENTS SEIZE U.S. EMBASSY AND HOLD HOSTAGES

> "TEHERAN, IRAN, Nov. 4 - Moslem students stormed the United States Embassy in Teheran today, seized about 90 Americans and vowed to stay there until the deposed Shah was sent back from New York to face trial in Iran.
>
> "There were no reports of casualties in the takeover of the Embassy building, although witnesses said some of the several hundred attackers were armed."[1]

For the duration of the hostage crisis, and ultimately his presidency, President Carter attempted to free these citizens. Diplomatic initiatives, the seizure of Iranian resources, deportation of illegal Iranian aliens, economic sanctions, passive military air and naval deployments, and overt military operations were all tried - - and, in turn, each failed! Military options were discussed from the first day of the crisis in the National Security Council (NSC) and included: the seizure of Iranian oil fields, retaliatory bombing, mining of harbors, total blockade, seizure of Kharg Island, covert operations, and finally, a rescue operation.[2] Only the latter action, a rescue, was attempted. But, it was aborted in the Iranian desert on 24 April 1980.

History reveals the hostage crisis as the most important issue

during the 1980 presidential election. The electorate showed their dissatisfaction with President Carter's handling of the crisis. The ballot box guaged their discontent; Reagan was elected, but Jimmy Carter, a lame duck president, continued to work for the hostages' release. Regretably for President Carter, he apparently won the hostages' release through his defeat in the Presidential election. Historically then, it is significant that 20 January 1981 coincidentally mark a beginning for the Reagan administration, an end to the Carter presidency, and, most significantly, the release from captivity of 53 American hostages. They were detained by Iran for one year, two months, and sixteen days.

Planning for a hostage rescue attempt began with the first of many NSC meetings on 5 November 1979. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security advisor, called the meeting to discuss diplomatic initiatives available to the United States and the importance of mobilizing Islamic support behind our efforts. During this meeting Dr. Brzezinski requested that military contingency plans be prepared for use if militants began killing their hostages.[3]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) could not have been less ready to respond. Problems abounded! Logistically, there were no U.S. bases or negotiated basing rights within striking distance of Iran, resources were not available in the area, and strategic

movement of the assault force a puzzle. Intelligence was nonexistent. After the revolution intelligence sources disappeared. There were no agents nor active collection system in Iran. Operationally, there was no force capable of conducting the rescue nor contingency plans for such an operation. It took five months of intensive preparation before an operational rescue plan emerged. Planning was conducted by the JCS and their new joint task force (JTF) formed especially for the mission. More drastic military options were also considered by the NSC and planned by the JCS during the early stages of the crisis. "Until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan [23 December 1979], the trend was toward more and more serious consideration of military action. The Soviet aggression against Afghanistan arrested this trend, and our strategy increasingly became that of saving the hostages' lives and of promoting our national interest by exercising military restraint."[4] With Soviets in Afghanistan, the rescue operation became the only feasible military option.

On 4 November 1979, Colonel "Charlie" Beckwith, commander of the Army's elite counterterrorist unit known as "Delta", was preparing his unit for a redeployment to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Beckwith recalls, "I was awakened by the news around 7:00 AM. One of my officers called, 'Thought you'd like to know, Boss. The American Embassy in Iran has gone down. The entire staff is being held hostage.'"[5] "When he arrived at Bragg,

Beckwith had not at all begun to assess the problems of mounting a rescue mission, beyond realizing what any military man would know - - logistically speaking it would be a bear. There were the vast distances, nearly 1,000 miles, of Iranian wasteland that had to be crossed, then the assault itself, against a heavily guarded building complex stuck in the middle of a city of 4,000,000 hostile folks. Nothing could be more difficult. If our government does elect to use force, Beckwith thought, obviously Delta, the country's door-busters will be used; but they'll never get to that point."[6] His assessment was correct. Nothing could have been more difficult! He was pleasantly surprised five months later when the President called upon Delta to conduct the rescue. Their mission probably resembled the following:

> **On order, JTF will covertly enter IRAN; assault the American Embassy in TEHERAN; free the hostages; and get everyone safely out of the country.**

There is a lot to be learned by examining this operation using historical hindsight. It is the intent of this study to identify mistakes and formulate them into operational lessons learned. Hopefully, during this analysis answers will be found to the BIG question, Why did the hostage rescue attempt fail?

CHAPTER II

THE PLAN

Initial planning emphasis concentrated on the development of a "no frills" rescue concept which could be implemented quickly if the Iranians started killing their hostages. MG James Vaught was selected by General David Jones, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), to command the new JTF created to deal exclusively with the hostage crisis. MG Vaught, without staff, troops, or equipment was constantly fighting against time to organize, plan, and train his JTF to a level of mission readiness required for the rescue attempt. While MG Vaught was busy with the JCS, Col. Beckwith's staff worked diligently from 6 - 16 November 1979 to develop an initial concept, which Beckwith described as "straightforward - - and suicidal"![1] This initial plan called for Delta to conduct a parachute assault on a drop zone east of Teheran, steal vehicles and move via these trucks through Teheran to the American Embassy. There they would fight their way into the compound, locate and free the hostages, and then move the entire force back through Teheran, fighting whenever necessary, to the Mehrabad Airport. Delta would then seize and defend the airport until American aircraft could land and evacuate the hostages and Delta. If evacuation aircraft could not make it to

the airport, Delta would be prepared to evade and escape overland with the hostages.[2] One of Beckwith's subordinates summed up the situation in hostile Iran perfectly. "The difference between this and the Alamo is that Davey Crockett didn't have to fight his way in."[3] Both Beckwith and MG Vaught agreed that this initial plan had zero chance of success and advised their superiors, General Jones and Dr. Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, that more time was needed to develop a sound plan.

During the period 18-20 November 1979, Iranian militants released thirteen of the hostages. This action reinforced beliefs in the NSC that the crisis could be ended diplomatically and eased the pressure for an immediate rescue attempt. JCS planning emphasis shifted to more feasible alternatives. Planners worked through a maze of problems from 6 November 1979 until 19 April 1980 before finally developing a solution. Constraints were numerous. The more significant ones addressed: operations security (OPSEC); intelligence; planning; training; JTF organization, command and control; and mission readiness.

OPSEC. It was quickly recognized that absolute surprise would be required for the mission to succeed. The planning group mandated absolute normalcy of operations within our government, especially the Department of Defense (DOD). The mission was too risky to endure a careless leak of information regarding rescue planning. Accordingly, OPSEC was stressed to everyone and

permeated the JTF. Dr. Brzezinski stressed the importance of security when he requested DOD to begin contingency planning on 6 November 1979. OPSEC affected everything: JTF creation; organization, command and control; compartmentalization of the planning staff; joint training; JTF unit integrity and cohesion; pilot selection; helicopter selection, communications, etc.

Intelligence. Intelligence was the name of the game. Everyone involved had questions. What were the disposition and effectiveness of Iranian Armed Forces? Their radar capabilities? The number of guards at the embassy? Their posts, arms, training and proficiency? Where were the hostages being held in the embassy? How about embassy floor plans? How do doors and windows open? How are they locked? How thick are the walls and what are they made of? All of these and thousands more had to be answered to develop a sound plan. Details had to be obtained on the weather, guards, embassy, hostages, possible desert landing sites, Teheran, the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and Iranian Armed Forces. Answers to these and many other intelligence requirements could not depend upon an existent covert agent network because none existed!

Our only means for gathering intelligence was overhead photography and television reports, but efforts were quickly underway to reestablish agents in Teheran. A retired CIA operative was inserted into Iran in late December. Along with an Iranian exile, this agent layed a foundation for the rescue

attempt. The Iranian exile purchased Delta's in country transportation, to be used from their anticipated hide site 50 miles southeast of the city to the embassy, and rented a warehouse to store the vehicles.[4] Despite these efforts, Beckwith wanted some of his own operators to act as advance men in Teheran. Several Delta volunteers were turned down by the CIA, before Major (Retired) Richard J. Meadows, a civilian consultant with Delta, was reluctantly accepted.

Meadows, a retired Army officer, had served in the Army's Special Forces (SF) for most of his distinguished career. He had proven himself a capable leader and covert operator during operations behind enemy lines in North Viet Nam and Cambodia. He is best remembered for participation in the attempt to rescue prisoners of war (POW) from the Son Tay Prison Camp in North Viet Nam. "If he hadn't done so many things that are classified, he'd have been the most decorated soldier in the Army," says retired Colonel Elliott Sydnor, who joined Meadows on the abortive attempt to rescue POWs at Son Tay, North Viet Nam.[5] "I can categorically say Dick Meadows is the finest soldier I have ever served with," says Colonel James Morris, [then] Director of Special Forces training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. "I'd follow him anywhere."[6]

Meadows lived up to his advanced billing. With other agents

from the SF and sister services, Meadows, a Beckwith confidant, was inserted into Teheran to gather intelligence. He reconned Desert Two (hide sites for both Delta and the RH-53 transport helicopters), routes from the hide site to Teheran, and through the city's streets to the embassy. He spent hours outside the embassy observing the guards and the compound wall. He visited the warehouse where truck transportation was being stored. He planned to meet Delta at Desert Two and guide the assault force by foot to their hide site near Garmsar. Then he would accompany Beckwith on a route recon to the embassy. Meadows planned to go over the wall with Delta and be extracted along with the hostages and operators.[7]

Planning. Information rapidly became the most valued asset of the planning group. As emphasis shifted from the possible emergency rescue mission to a more diplomatic approach, so planning shifted to a more deliberate rescue operation. Initially, all the planners knew was that Delta would be used to enter the embassy and free the hostages. All other operational aspects were unknown.

The most significant problem was determining the best method for inserting Delta stealthfully into Iran, Teheran and the embassy. And how to extract the assault force and freed hostages from these same locales. These were the monumental problems around which concept development revolved. The sensitive

diplomatic situation, number and complexity of military plans, and lack of intelligence combined to make the planning process both turbulent and dynamic. NSC and JCS guidance changed several times during the planning process. Each change required a redirection of planning emphasis. A chronologically arranged listing of Presidential, NSC, and JCS guidance can be found in the Appendix.

The most important JTF planning conference occurred at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on 2 December 1979. The meeting's purpose was to resolve Delta's infiltration and exfiltration problems.[8] Three infiltration options were discussed: an airborne assault in the vicinity of Teheran, a truck movement across the Turkey-Iran border, and a heliborne insertion into or near Teheran. After much discussion, the helicopter option was selected for both infiltration and exfiltration. The Navy's RH-53D helicopter was later selected for the mission because of its range, capacity, folding rotor blades for aircraft carrier operations, and OPSEC.[9] An antisubmarine warfare (ASW) squadron equipped with the RH-53D was attached to the JTF. These Navy pilots were not accustomed to the rigorous flying conditions and could not adapt to the unorthodox, low level, blacked out flying using night vision devices. The senior Marine in the JCS, LTG Phillip Shulter, suggested and obtained approval for the use of Marine Corps rather than Navy pilots, even though the Marines were not

experienced with the Navy's RH-53D helicopter. Marine pilots were then selected for the mission based upon their individual availability and experience.

The release of thirteen hostages from 18-20 November 1979 and their subsequent debriefing provided valuable intelligence. Foremost among this information was the knowledge that three hostages were being held, not on the embassy compound, but in the Iranian Foreign Ministry. The geographic separation of these three hostages from the main group mandated two simultaneous rescues. An additional assault capability was required for the second objective because all of Delta's operators were needed for the embassy.[10] A 13-man team from SF was selected for the Foreign Ministry mission and joined the JTF as part of the assault force.

The number of helicopters required by the assault force increased as planning progressed. The initial assault requirement was 70-men (4 RH-53Ds), but grew to 132-men (8 RH-53Ds).[11] The maintenance unpredictability of the helicopters was considered by planners. They added back up aircraft and established helicopter abort criteria for each phase of the mission. Col. Beckwith and MG Vaught agreed that the mission required seven RH-53Ds for launch from the USS Nimitz, six from Desert One (refuel site) to Desert Two (hide site), and five to

begin the actual embassy assault and extraction.[12]

A major planning consideration involved landing sites for a refueling and cross-loading operation and for the evacuation out of Iran. On 3 December 1979, the JTF J2 discovered a C-141 capable airfield at Manzariyeh, 35 miles south of Teheran, for extraction and continued to search for Desert One (the refueling and cross-loading location). Eventually a sand airstrip 200 miles southeast of Teheran was selected, but planners were not certain the sand airfield would support the weight of Air Force MC-130 and EC-130 aircraft. An on site reconnaissance was required and approved by President Carter on 22 March 1980. It was completed on 31 March 1980 and included the installation of remotely activated, low intensity runway lights. The mission proved that the heaviest of the aircraft, the EC-130 tanker, could land and take off at the site. Another piece of the puzzle was in place - - Desert One was locked in!

Training. "Training for the Iran hostage rescue operation was a many-faceted and complex task that was necessarily accomplished concurrently with mission planning. It was controlled by the dictates of the constantly evolving plan. The training program was affected by the development of new intelligence during the entire period from inception to execution of the mission."[13] OPSEC requirements prevented the integration of unit training and, like planning, forced the compartmentalization of the

training effort. Each element of the JTF accomplished their own training at different locations. They were brought together only for joint rehearsals and, even then, direct contact between participants from different elements was not permitted.

The Air Force's MC-130 and EC-130 aircrews concentrated on night infiltration flying techniques which included blacked out landings and take offs. They were permitted to practice take offs and landings on a dirt airstrip for only one night during preparations; all other operations were conducted on paved runways. They never practiced on sand strips similar to Desert One. The crews were from the 8th Special Operations Squadron and were assigned to the JTF as a unit complete with aircraft, staff, crews, and maintenance personnel.

Helicopter pilot training was a significant problem throughout training. When Navy pilots failed to adapt to the unique flying requirements, a new Marine helicopter detachment commander and pilots were selected on approximately 9 December 1979. Unlike the Air Force C-130 aircrews, the Marines were not a unit but a group of individual pilots pooled for this particular mission. This detachment trained near Yuma, Arizona, from 9-20 December 1979 and again from 5 January 1980 until the rescue was attempted. Colonel Beckwith described the helicopter pilots' task as most difficult:

> "Most of the flying was done at night. It was obvious the Marine pilots had a lot of work to do. They knew it, too. The task they had been given was unusually hard. It was one that called for an altered mind-set. The transition from flying one helicopter to another, a Chinook to a Sea Stallion, for example, was handled very smoothly. That wasn't the problem. The real difficulty was in acquiring - - and then developing and polishing - - new, more complicated mission skills. These leathernecks were being asked to do something extraordinary. Before this time, flying a helicopter at night was unusual. When it was done, it was always in ideal conditions. Now these pilots were being asked to fly right off the deck through rough canyon country, not at 1,500 feet, but down in the canyons where radar couldn't detect them, and do it without lights!"[14]

Both helicopter and pilots were required to perform extraordinarily. They had little margin for human error or equipment failure.

Delta's training was conducted at a secure mountain camp, at Yuma, Arizona, and at Fort Bragg. Their 13-man SF attachment trained in West Germany.

The JTF began to appear mission capable on 8 February 1980 following independent element training and several joint rehearsals. Before the operation was attempted, the JTF conducted seven rehearsals in the American Southwest.

Organization, Command and Control. The JCS decision to bypass their existing joint command structure meant a special JTF had to be established for the rescue mission. MG Vaught was given command of a JTF without commanders, units, staff, a chain of command, equipment, headquarters, etc. As the JCS developed

their rescue concept and identified requirements for specific capabilities, units were added to the JTF. "The JCS used their existing concept plan (CONPLAN) for the use of intelligence assets and selection of the ground force. Other major [JTF] areas of endeavor, such as task organization planning, integration of concurrent planning by subordinate units, and determination of support and requirements, were compartmentalized and reliant upon ad hoc arrangements."[15]

Readiness. The dynamic nature of the planning process caused training problems and constant changes to the rescue concept. In turn, these problems and changes slowed the acquisition of JTF readiness. Causes of the more significant changes were: hostages discovered to be in two different locations (20 November 1979), initial airlift planning 70 men (2 December 1979), new helicopter pilots selected (9 December 1979), use of EC-130s proposed for refueling (27 December 1979), airlift planning increased to 120 men (4 January 1980), two additional C-130 aircraft added due to increase in troop lift and number of RH-53Ds (21 January 1980), Desert One approved (7 April 1980). When the location of Desert One was resolved on 7 April, a final plan emerged. But even that plan lacked one key ingredient - - the exact location of the hostages in the embassy compound!

Colonel Beckwith described the approved plan completely in his book Delta Force.

"The code name of the mission to free the hostages was Eagle Claw. As described to General Jones, the basic plan was this: Three troop-carrying MC-130s and three fuel-bearing EC-130s would depart from the island of Masirah, which is off the coast of Oman, and fly to Iran, where they would land 200 miles southeast of Teheran at a location called Desert One - - at 33 degrees 05′ N by 55 degrees 48′ E. On the ground they would wait for the arrival of eight RH-53D helicopters.

"Launching from the carrier Nimitz somewhere in the Gulf of Oman, the eight helicopters, flying a different route and in four sections of two each, would arrive approximately thirty minutes after the last 130 had landed.

"On arrival, the RH-53Ds would refuel and on-load the assault force of 118 men.

"Unless six helicopters - - a minimum figure deemed necessary by the air planners to lift the combined weight of the assault team and the equipment - - were able to depart and fly to the next location, the mission would be aborted at Desert One.

"Once the helicopters had refueled and on loaded Delta, they would proceed toward Teheran and the 130s would return to Masirah.

"Flying two and a half to three hours, the helicopters would land at Delta's hide-site - - at 35 degrees 14′ N by 52 degrees 15′ E - - ideally one hour before sunrise.

"After Delta had been off loaded, the RH-53Ds would fly to their hide-site fifteen miles north of Delta, where they would spend the daylight hours hidden in the hills around Garmsar.

"At Delta's landing zone, the assault team would be met by two of the DOD (Department of Defense) agents who had been placed in Teheran several days before. They would lead Colonel Beckwith and his men five miles overland to a remote wadi sixty-five miles southeast of Teheran, and there Delta would remain concealed throughout the daylight hours.

"After last light, two of the DOD agents would return to the wadi, driving a Datsun pickup truck and a Volkswagen bus. One of these vehicles would transport the six drivers and six translators, who had come with

Delta, back toward the outskirts of Teheran to a warehouse where six enclosed Mercedes trucks were stored.

"The other vehicle would carry Colonel Beckwith on a reconnaissance of the route to the embassy. Once the route and the vicinity around the compound had been checked, Beckwith would return to the hide-site. The six trucks would already have arrived and be waiting.

"Delta, which had for this mission been reorganized into a Red, a White, and a Blue Element, would climb aboard the trucks around 8:30 PM. They would be driven north along the Damavand Road, where they would encounter a permanent 2-man checkpoint at Eyvanekey and at Sherifabad. If for some reason the trucks were stopped and searched, the guards would be seized and carried with Delta.

"The next step had some flexibility built into it. The precise route through Teheran to the embassy and the method the trucks would use to traverse this course, convoy or leapfrog, would be determined at this time and would rest largely on the recommendations put forth by the DOD agents and on what Colonel Beckwith had been able to observe.

"A 13-man assault team, tasked to rescue the three hostages being held in the Foreign Ministry Building, would travel in the Volkswagen bus and take a different route to their target.

"Between 11:00 PM and midnight a select group of operators would drive up to the embassy in the Datsun pickup and with .22-caliber suppressed (with silencers) handguns take down the two guard posts and the walking guards along Roosevelt Avenue.

"Driving two abreast, the trucks carrying Red, White, and Blue Elements would follow a little distance behind. When the assault team reached a position on Roosevelt Avenue across from the soccer stadium, they would leave the trucks and, using ladders, swiftly and silently climb over the embassy wall and drop into the compound.

"Red Element, comprising forty men, was responsible for securing the western sector of the compound, freeing any hostages found in the staff cottages and commissary, and neutralizing the guards who were in the motor pool and power plant areas.

"Blue Element, also forty men, was responsible for the embassy's eastern sector and freeing hostages found in the Deputy Chief of Mission's residence, the Ambassador's residence, the Mushroom, and the chancellery.

"The smaller 13-man White Element was responsible for securing Roosevelt Avenue and eventually covering the withdrawal of Red and Blue Elements to the Amjadieh Soccer Stadium [adjacent to the embassy]. One machinegun, an M60, was positioned to enfilade Roosevelt Avenue to the north and another, the HK21 [a West German 7.62mm machinegun], to cover it to the south.

"Two AC-130s [gunships] flying on station over Teheran would prevent Iranian reinforcements from reaching the embassy compound. Using a predetermined grid system that pinpointed targets and zones in the area of the embassy, Major Buckshot and Sergeant Major Foreman were responsible on the ground for calling in, if necessary, covering fire from the gunships.

"Inside the embassy compound, once Red Element - - which had the farthest to travel and most area to cover - - was in position, the wall was to be blown.

"This large explosion signaled the beginning of the assault on the buildings. Any armed Iranian guards encountered would be killed and the hostages located and freed.

"The operation would take approximately forty-five minutes.

"Major Snuffy (pseudonym), who was acting as Delta's air officer, would already have alerted the RH-53Ds outside of Garmsar and by now they would be orbiting north of the city.

"At his signal, the choppers would begin to arrive in the vicinity of the compound.

"If, as was expected, the poles placed in the embassy's open acres could be removed, the first helicopter would be called directly into the embassy grounds. There it would load all the freed hostages, who would be accounted for by Delta's medics.

"A second chopper could also be brought in.

"If the poles could not be removed, the alternate

plan was to move the hostages across to the soccer stadium.

"Once all the hostages they'd liberated had been lifted out, Red, followed by Blue, would withdraw through the gaping hole in the wall and cross Roosevelt Avenue to the stadium, where, accompanied by White, they would load on the remaining helicopters.

"Sometime during the assault on the embassy, the 13-man Special Forces team tasked to assault the Foreign Ministry Building would begin it's operation. Their plan was to scale the outside of the building and enter through it's third story windows. They would then eliminate any resistance they met and free the three hostages.

"Outside the building, in an adjacent parklike area, one of the helicopters would make the pick-up.

"While these operations were going on and the targets in Teheran were going down, thirty-five miles to the south, in Manzariyeh, a ranger contingent would fly in, take, and secure the airfield there. They would hold the field until the helicopters arrived from Teheran.

"Once everyone had arrived in Manzariyeh, all of the hostages, drivers, translators, helicopter pilots, crews, DOD agents, Special Forces assault team, and Delta Force would be airlifted out of Iran on C-141 StarLifters.

"The Rangers would then dry up Manzariyeh and be flown out themselves.

"A contingency plan covered the eventuality that not enough helicopters would be available to lift the hostages and the assault forces out of Teheran at one time.

"In that case, in the soccer stadium across from the compound - - if, after removing the hostages, there were not enough RH-53Ds to remove the assault force - - Delta would take up a defensive position around the stadium's perimeter.

"The remaining helicopters, however many there would be, would shuttle back and forth between Manzariyeh - - where they would unload the hostages and refuel - - and the stadium, until every member of the assault team had been removed.

"If no helicopter had been able to return, Delta would be prepared to evade and escape."[16]

President Carter approved this plan on 16 April 1980. He and his senior civilian and military advisors were convinced that the final plan was feasible and worthy of the risk involved.

CHAPTER III

THE EXECUTION

The rescue force was placed on a seven-day response status on 28 March 1980. The early days of April were dramatic ones for the JTF. They felt ready and, with the breakdown in diplomatic negotiations on 1 April 1980, believed their opportunity was coming. The NSC began to seriously discuss military actions again and recommended a rescue to the President on 10 April 1980. The next day, frustrated with diplomatic failure and determined to act decisively in the face of growing criticism, the President decided to launch the rescue operation. The CJCS selected 24 April 1980 as D-day and directed MG Vaught to finalize deployment plans. A final plans review was conducted by the JTF commander on 15 April 1980; the President approved the plan on 16 April 1980; and deployment began on 19 April 1980.

The Marine helicopter pilots were flown onto the USS Nimitz cruising in the Indian Ocean. On board were the eight prepositioned RH-53D helicopters they would fly during the mission. Two advance bases were established in Southwest Asia. The JTF headquarters was established at Wadi Kena, Egypt. MG Vaught would provide command and control from this base. A staging base was established on Masirah Island off the coast of

Oman. The C-130 aircraft, crews, and Delta would launch from this location.

Located at Wadi Kena, Egypt, Delta finished final rehearsals, inspections, weapons test firing, and settled in for their last full night of sleep. In the middle of the night on 23 April 1980, Colonel Beckwith was awakened and informed that the last puzzle piece had been found. The Iranians had released the hostages' cook; he had been interrogated by the CIA and revealed the exact location of the hostages. Until this happened, Delta's assault plan was based upon their best guess of the hostages' location. They assumed that the only habitable buildings in the complex were the Deputy Chief of Mission's residence, the Ambassador's residence, the chancellery, and staff cottages. The hostages had to be in one or any combination of these buildings. Delta's assault plan, training, and rehearsals were based on this assumption. When the freed cook revealed that all hostages at the embassy were in the chancellery, Delta's plan to find and free the hostages was fortuitously simplified from seizing and searching four buildings on the 27-acre compound to assaulting one building - - the chancellery. Beckwith modified his plan accordingly.

Delta departed Wadi Kena for Masirah in the morning on 24 April 1980. At 1800 hours that evening the first C-130 launched from Masirah; destination Desert One. The eight RH-53Ds launched from the USS Nimitz. "The helicopters hovered briefly at 400 feet,

grouping themselves into a loose, diamond shaped formation, then swung north at 120 knots toward the Iranian coastline 50 miles away. On the Nimitz's bridge, an officer picked up a scrambler phone. In an instant, he was connected to an Egyptian air base about 300 miles south of Cairo where the task force's commander, Maj. Gen. James Vaught, was standing by. Operation Eagle Claw, he told Vaught, was under way as scheduled at five minutes past 7, local time."[1]

Enroute navigation and the penetration of Iranian airspace caused no problems for the six transport aircraft. They arrived over Desert One on schedule. The remotely activated runway lights worked and aircraft started landing on schedule. Once on the ground, the aircraft off loaded Delta and its equipment and repositioned for the helicopter refueling operation. Security forces were dispatched immediately, the airfield control group (headed by Colonel Jim Kyle, Air Force) established their command post, pathfinders assumed control of the airspace and Delta reconfigured into helicopter loads. While establishing security at Desert One, traffic was discovered on a road near the airfield. A busload of 44 Iranian nationals was encountered and stopped. The Iranians were off loaded and held. Per contingency plans, they were to be evacuated on board a C-130 and returned to Manzariyeh unharmed at the conclusion of the operation. A fuel truck and pickup truck were also encountered. When they failed to halt, an M72, 66 mm, Light Antitank Weapon was fired at the

fuel truck. It was hit and caught fire. The driver left the burning vehicle, retreated to the following pick up truck and fled across the desert. All other Desert One activities were routine. Everyone awaited the arrival of helicopters.

The RH-53D infiltration was not as fortunate. Their plan called for the aircraft to fly low level, in pairs, under strict radio silence, and blacked out to avoid radar detection. Command and control was exercised through prearranged visual light signals. In their final briefing, they were told the entire flight route would be under visual flight conditions; weather would not be a problem. Their ensuing odyssey was described in the Holloway Commission's Rescue Mission Report.

> **"Approximately two hours after take off, the crew of Helicopter #6 received cockpit indications of an impending rotor blade failure; landed; verified the malfunction (an automatic abort situation); and abandoned their aircraft."**[2]

A companion aircraft (#8) landed, picked up the crew, and continued the mission; helicopter #6 was abandoned intact in the Iranian desert.

"Approximately one hour thereafter, the helicopter formation unexpectedly encountered a dust cloud of unknown size and density."[3]

The formation continued under instrument flight conditions, broke out of the weather and soon encountered a more intense storm. LTC Ed Seiffert, the helicopter leader, and his companion aircraft turned about after entering the first dust cloud and radioed JTF headquarters via a special secure radio. He explained the dust phenomenon and was instructed to continue. The remainder of the flight had continued attempting to penetrate the dust storm. At this point, all flight integrity was lost. Eighty percent of the way to Desert One helicopter #5 also aborted due to navigation and flight instrument problems and returned to the USS Nimitz. Enroute to Desert One, helicopter #2 had experienced hydraulic problems but continued. The pilot hoped the aircraft could be repaired at Desert One.

The helicopter force was scheduled to begin landing thirty minutes after the last C-130 arrived at Desert One. Beckwith recalled,

"Shortly after [Major] Schaefer [the lead helicopter pilot] arrived, maybe ten minutes later, the second helo came in. Oddly, it came in from a different direction. The third arrived from still another direction. So, to, did the fourth. The fifth and sixth came in together and also from another direction. No two came through the same hole in the sky. Spread out, an hour to an hour and a half late, and coming from all different directions. The seventh and eighth helos never arrived at all. Obviously, something had happened. There was now no room for any

error. Already we had lost our two backup choppers."[4]

Even though the delay caused by the RH-53D's and dust storm would result in Delta and the helicopters arriving at their respective hide sites after daylight, Beckwith decided to continue. Delta started to load the helicopters after the last one landed and refueled. Simultaneously, the Iranians from the bus were loaded onto a C-130 for evacuation. While Delta was loading, the pilot of helicopter #2 notified Lt Col Seiffert that his aircraft could not be repaired. The loss of this aircraft put the JTF below the minimum of six RH-53Ds needed to continue. Colonels Kyle and Beckwith were notified of the abort situation. Colonel Kyle, the Desert One commander, notified MG Vaught at his command post in Egypt. Colonel Beckwith, at MG Vaught's request, considered going ahead with only five aircraft but finally recommended that the operation be aborted. His recommendation was forwarded through MG Vaught to General Jones, Dr. Brown, and finally to President Carter. The President approved his recommendation.

At Desert One, Delta began to reload C-130s for evacuation. "The noise generated by 12 C-130 engines and 12 RH-53D engines made voice or radio communications difficult. Personnel moving about Desert One were shadowy, somewhat fuzzy figures, barely recognizable."[5] Major Schaefer's helicopter, the first to arrive at Desert One, had burned off too much fuel idling waiting to continue and had to refuel again before he could return to the

Nimitz. While repositioning to refuel, his helicopter hit a EC-130. Both aircraft exploded. Eight aircrew members (five Air Force and three Marines) were killed and five injured. Delta operators on the EC-130 were forced to rapidly evacuate the aircraft, leaving equipment and ammunition on board. Exploding ammunition then hit adjacent aircraft. Colonel Kyle decided to abandon the remaining helicopters and equipment so the raiders could evacuate Desert One as quickly as possible. An air strike was requested on Desert One to destroy the five serviceable, abandoned RH-53Ds and classified information but was disapproved by the President.[6] The entire force was evacuated by C-130 to Masirah. The operation had ended before the actual rescue was attempted. Left in the Iranian desert were the bodies of eight servicemen, a destroyed EC-130 and RH-53D, four fully operable RH-53Ds, two unserviceable RH-53Ds, and numerous classified documents and equipment.

Eagle Claw had failed!

CHAPTER IV

THE AFTERMATH

The rescue operation's aftermath has generated numerous critical appraisals. Without exception, these critiques have praised the American servicemen who participated! The Holloway Commission, convened by the JCS to study the operation, said it best.

> **"The American servicemen who participated in this mission - - planner, crewman, or trooper - - deserved to have a successful outcome. It was the ability, dedication, and enthusiasm of these people who made what everyone thought was an impossibility into what should have been a success."** [1]

Valuable lessons learned were revealed through investigation of the most criticized aspects of the plan. Review of the operation's planning, training, and execution identified significant problems in the following areas:

- **Principles of War**
- **OPSEC**
- **Intelligence**
- **Plans Review**
- **Joint Training**
- **Organization**
- **Command and Control**
- **Leadership**
- **Readiness**
- **Pilot Selection**

Principles of War. Two basic principles of warfare are simplicity and unity of command. A simple plan understood by everyone and executed vigorously usually succeeds. Conversely, complex plans are understood by few, usually executed lethargically, and doomed to failure. Complexity represents the antithesis of victory, simplicity its virtue! Virtually the same may be said of unity of command. A thoroughly understood chain of command from the highest to lowest echelons is a mandate for military operations. Within the chain of command the need for unit, as opposed to individual, identity is a must. Violations to unity of command, such as the structuring of a new JTF without unit identity or cohesion, are recipe for disaster.

Eagle Claw was extremely complex. The operation included: the cooperation of two foreign governments (Egypt and Oman); reactivation of a dormant CIA agent network; advance men from several services; an SF assault team; Delta; Army Rangers; Air Force C-141 and C-130 aircraft, crews and maintenance personnel; Marine pilots; Navy RH-53D helicopters, maintenance personnel, and the Nimitz Task Force; Iranian collaborators; the seizure and defense of three landing zones; a major refueling operation at night in the Iranian desert; and a force of approximately 175 men to remain in a hostile country for 48 hours.[2]

The JTF for Eagle Claw was created especially for the operation. Delta and the Air Force's 8th Special Operations

Squadron were the only units assigned to the JTF. As one might expect, these were the only organizations within the JTF that demonstrated sound organization, unit integrity, and cohesion. Others like the Marine pilot detachment were established in much the same way as the JTF and suffered continuously from this mistake. On a larger scale, the JTF failed to bring its units together for any form of joint training, briefings, or field duty. JTF units focused entirely on their particular mission with little concern or interest for other units or the JTF's overall mission. Environments like this usually create mistrust and animosity. During Eagle Claw, these ill feelings existed between Marine pilots and other members of the JTF, especially Delta.

OPSEC. Success depended upon absolute surprise. Any leak, rumor, or indication of rescue preparation would have doomed the operation. For this reason, OPSEC was constantly stressed. It was considered in every planning, training, or operational decision made by the JTF and this frequently led to the selection of less than the best course of action. This selection of less than desirable decisions based purely on OPSEC was not wise. OPSEC was important but should have been balanced with operational considerations when included in the decision making process. OPSEC was always given as the reason to support bad decisions in the planning process. The most significant of these decisions follow:

- The CJCS decided not to use their existing joint command structure for the mission but rather to create from scratch a special JTF. His reason was secrecy, but the problems of creating the new JTF were more than enough to occupy MG Vaught let alone when juxtaposed with the complex rescue mission.

- The planning, training, and execution were totally compartmentalized to avoid leaks. Generally, planners and operators knew only their individual aspects of the plan. Attempts to create unit cohesion, integrity and coordination were avoided due to fears of OPSEC violations. Weather forecasters were never permitted to meet or brief pilots.[3] This was certainly a factor in overlooking the dust storm conditions typical in the Iranian desert. Consolidation of the entire JTF at a training base and obvious requirements for joint training, rehearsals and critiques were all purposely avoided for OPSEC reasons.[4] The use of in-flight radio communications was prohibited for fear of communications security violations.[5] Had radios been used, the RH-53D (#5) that aborted and returned to the USS Nimitz would have known that Desert One flying conditions were good and the aircraft could have continued. The pilot of this

aircraft said later that he would have proceeded to Desert One had he known it was clear.[6] The addition of this one aircraft would have provided the JTF the capability to proceed beyond Desert One.

- The use of an independent plans review group to trouble shoot the planning process was avoided because of OPSEC. Accordingly, the planners and their immediate superiors, the JCS, reviewed their own plans.

- OPSEC was also involved in helicopter and helicopter pilot selection. The Navy's RH-53D was selected because mission aircraft would launch from an aircraft carrier. A more powerful Air Force rescue version of the same aircraft was not selected because of OPSEC. Similarly, because the pilots would deploy from a carrier, Navy pilots were initially selected and later replaced by Marines. Either would be accepted as typical pilots on board the carrier. The selection of better qualified Air Force pilots was rejected for OPSEC considerations - - they would have appeared unusual aboard the aircraft carrier.[7] Even the number of RH-53Ds on board Nimitz was governed by OPSEC. The carrier could only accommodate eight of these aircraft on the hanger deck. Any more than eight would have to be stored on the flight deck which was abnormal. Hence, disapproval for

increasing the number of helicopters on board.[8] The JTF used maintenance personnel from the Nimitz to maintain the helicopters used on the operation. Maintenance personnel used during training and the use of aircraft technical experts for checking the mission aircraft aboard Nimitz were disallowed for OPSEC.[9]

Intelligence. The drastic reduction in the number of CIA operatives under the Carter administration had an adverse effect on rescue planning. Following the revolution and ouster of the Shah and his supporters, our in country capability for gathering intelligence was destroyed. We had no one nor any covert system to activate in Iran. This collapse of our intelligence network can be traced to President Carter and his Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Stansfield Turner. Their policies had decimated the ranks of agents within the agency. Estimates on the number of CIA operatives worldwide at the beginning of the hostage crisis was approximately 300, down from a high point of thousands in the early 1960s.[10] Planning delays resulted while agents were inserted to gather much needed information. The compartmentalization of intelligence personnel and their separation from JTF operators also caused problems. For instance, the intelligence community was aware of the Iranian bus schedules and could have told operators that a bus would pass Desert One while the rescue force was on the ground. The

National Intelligence Survey of Iran used for rescue planning mentioned the possibility of dust storms and indicated their frequency by location and month.[11] While this information was known to planners it was never disseminated to pilots because of compartmentalization of efforts. Intelligence planners never knew the operators had a need for the bus schedules and dust storm forcasts.

Plans Review. An independent plans review group was rejected due to OPSEC. As a result the JCS became both principal planners and reviewers. During these plan reviews, written plans were not provided. This prevented the JCS from adequately reviewing plans and orders in the privacy of their own offices with the advice of their staffs. The entire operation was never reduced to paper -- there was no written operation plan (OPLAN). Plans were presented verbally to the Chiefs in the tank without the presence of expert staff officers. "In this connection it must be noted that on the three occasions when the JCS were briefed on the status and content of the plan, there had been no intervening 'scrub-down' or 'murder board' of the planning product. Further, for the same OPSEC reasons, the JCS were acting in essence as their own action officers and were denying themselves the staffing support they normally enjoy when reviewing plans of a less sensitive nature. In sum, this meant that the hostage rescue plan was never subjected to rigorous testing and evaluation by qualified, independent observers and monitors short

of the JCS themselves."[12]

Joint Training. Joint Armed Forces doctrine places the responsibility for training and support on service component commanders. This was followed implicitly by the JTF. Colonel Beckwith was responsible for his Army training and support. Colonel Pittman was responsible for the Marine pilots. Colonel Kyle acted as the component commander for the Air Force. There was little attempt to regulate and support training activities from the JTF headquarters. Even joint training exercises were supported by component commanders.

For this type of special operation, detailed planning, training, rehearsals and coordination were essential ingredients in the recipe for success. Constant supervision and direction from the JTF was required but was not accomplished. Because of the dynamic nature of planning, the operation was never fully rehearsed under anticipated conditions.[13] The Air Force conducted only limited practice landings and take offs on dirt surfaces and never attempted to use a sand strip. Delta modified their assault plan in Egypt based upon updated information on the hostages' location, but never had the opportunity to rehearse the modified plan. The Marine pilots never fully rehearsed their refueling operation. In fact the entire operation at Desert One was never rehearsed, a fact which contributed to significant confusion during the rescue attempt. The Desert One operation is

a good example of the need for adequate rehearsal. Investigation by the Holloway Commission revealed the following:

> "As complex and difficult as the Desert One scenario was, it had not been fully rehearsed. A training exercise at the western training area conducted on 13-14 April with two C-130s and four H-53s was used to validate the Desert One concept. Perhaps because the scope and complexity of Desert One was not replicated in a full-dress rehearsal, the plan for this desert rendezvous was soft. There was no identifiable command post for the on-scene commander; a staff and runners were not anticipated; backup rescue radios were not available until the third C-130 arrived; and, lastly, key personnel and those with critical functions were not identified for ease of recognition. For example, when the Desert One on-scene commander's name surfaced during post-mission interviews with helicopter pilots, they stated that, in some cases, they did not know or recognize the authority of those giving orders at Desert One.[14]

There were too many things overlooked in training. The JTF commander did not get totally involved in JTF preparations to insure that thorough joint training, rehearsals, and coordination were accomplished.

Organization, Command and Control. The JTF had problems because it was created from scratch. A small initial planning cell eventually became the nucleus for the JTF staff. Colonel Jim Kyle was responsible for C-130 aircrew and aircraft mission readiness, and eventually became the commander of the Desert One refuel site. Initially, MG Gast, an Air Force consultant to the JTF on Iran, was considered by the JTF commander to be

responsible for all aviation matters including the Navy and later Marine Corps pilots.[15] After the Navy pilots were rejected and Marines substituted, Colonel Pittman became involved in Marine participation and over the months became their de facto component commander. Accompanied by the Marine helicopter detachment commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ed Seiffert, he was responsible for training a helicopter force to the highest level of readiness ever obtained in the Armed Forces - - and had to do it quickly without the staff support found in existing units. The ground assault force was commanded by Colonel Beckwith. The chain of command from the President to the commander JTF was clear but unique, because it placed the CJCS, General Jones, into the chain of command.

In sum, the JTF organization was ad hoc from its inception by the CJCS and this ad hoc arrangement complicated the operation unnecessarily during training and execution. The Holloway Commission's Rescue Mission Report was critical of the JTF organization, command and control arrangements. Their recommendations for improvement follow:

> "The [review] group's alternative for organization, command, and control would have used the stable, existing framework of the relevant JCS CONPLAN to organize, plan, train, and execute the mission as well as to provide the mandatory OPSEC. Prolonged ad hoc arrangements often result in tasking from different sources and can cause confusion at the operating level. These situational arrangements may hinder

preparation and can impact adversely on overall cohesion of effort. The review group's alternative would strive for a better balance between more appropriate disclosure policy, particularly at the Service Chief/CINC level, to enhance the organizing, equipping, and training of forces.

"Further, basic JCS CONPLAN methodologies and/or existing unified/specified command procedures make full provisions for compartmentalization. OPSEC can be, and has been, preserved when appropriate steps are taken. Thus, the entire preparation phase could have been accelerated and overall readiness enhanced.

". . . it is believed that application of an existing JCS CONPLAN and JCS/Service doctrinal precepts could have improved the organization, planning, and preparation of the force through unity of command and cohesion of effort. That, in turn, would have led to more effective command and control and enhanced overall JTF readiness."[16]

Leadership. "There are strong hints that the Joint Chiefs may get the blame for not putting in enough equipment, for not mounting several simultaneous strikes [in fact this was recommended by the JCS and NSC to the President but disapproved], for exaggerating the odds of success, and for somehow failing to give the President the military advice he needed."[17]

The Joint Chiefs were too close to the planning process. As the principal reviewers of the rescue plan perhaps they developed a certain pride of authorship; perhaps they lacked sufficient competence in special operations; perhaps they believed experts on subordinate staffs were accomplishing the necessary review; or perhaps they were just too far away from the operators to deal in reality. Whatever the case, it is apparent the JCS were overly

optimistic of a plan that had never been sufficiently planned or rehearsed to expect success. The false optimism of our senior leadership was manifested in many ways. The actual rescue at the embassy was considered the easiest part of the mission by the JCS, Dr. Brown, Dr. Brzezinski and the President. Yet, when the plan was approved, Delta still did not know the location of the hostages in the compound. Their plan was simply to enter the compound and shoot everyone carrying a weapon; find and free the hostages located in one or any combination of 14 buildings on the 27-acre compound; and shoot their way out. It is strange that our senior leaders would consider Delta's plan for a running gun battle as the easiest part of the mission.

As stated in press conferences and publications subsequent to the attempt, this same leadership described the plan as "carefully conceived and the training exhaustive."[18] However, history proves differently. The President wanted to minimize casualties and personally told General Jones to see that there would be no wanton killing.[19] But there is no evidence to reveal the President was ever advised that even the raiders felt casualties would be extensive with an Iranian death toll mounting into the 'hundreds'.[20] Alexander Scott, a columnist for the Armed Forces Journal International, sums up the performance of senior leadership in his article on the rescue mission.

"On the basis of the limited data now available, however, it does seem that the Pentagon gave the operation too high a probability of success. . . . It would also seem that the military participants may have been somewhat to blame in calculating these odds. As is so often the case, the military chain of command that knew about the Teheran raid became so caught up in the momentum of the operation, the need to defend it against various challenges and critics, and the pressure to act before hot weather and lengthening periods of daylight jeopardized its credibility, that various officers may well have suggested higher odds of success than history should have taught them were possible."[21]

Colonel Beckwith was severely criticized for his actions at Desert One regarding the decision to abort and his actions subsequent to the aircraft accident. Investigation reveals that Beckwith's decision was strictly in accordance with helicopter abort criteria established during planning and approved by the JCS, JTF, and NSC.[22] He required six helicopters to continue from Desert One. His thoughts on the possibility of continuing from Desert One with only five RH-53Ds follow:

"With five helicopters, Delta, minus twenty men, lands at the hide-site in daylight and then the helos fly to their location in the mountains, but hell, we all knew the eccentricities of choppers. There was a good chance two of them would not crank tomorrow. That would leave three helos to pick up 53 hostages, Delta, the DOD agents, and the assault team and their three hostages freed from the Foreign Ministry Building. What if one of them got hit with small arms fire as it comes in? That would leave two. Two for 178 people. It was just too close."[23]

Readiness. The JCS were not prepared for the hostage crisis. There were no contingency plans to deal with the problem. This lack of preparedness, when coupled with other bad decisions by the JCS (creation of a new JTF, OPSEC, compartmentalization, pilot selection, etc.) slowed the generation of force readiness. Hindsight reveals Delta and the Air Force achieved mission readiness relatively early, but a lack of information and pilot selection hampered JTF achievement of mission readiness. The Holloway Commission's comments on JTF readiness follow:

> "Training was planned and conducted on a highly decentralized basis within an informal component command structure that does not appear to have been clearly established. . . . Thoroughly integrated training exercises of the entire JTF for the final plan were not conducted, although joint training of all plan segments was conducted by portions of the component forces in conjunction with their respective roles and tasks. . . . COMJTF decentralized command supervision of training and evaluation, in part through the use of various advisors individually observing segments of the continuously evolving concept and plans.
>
> "Finally, the primacy of OPSEC considerations led COMJTF to decide that regular integration of training and readiness evaluations was undesirable."[24]

The Holloway Commission concluded that integrated training and rehearsals would have reduced risk and enhanced the probability of success, especially in this operation.

Pilot Selection. The Holloway Commission found fault with the pilot selection process. Their findings follow:

"During this period, USAF pilot resources included 114 qualified H-53 pilots, instructors, and flight examiners. Of these 96 were current in long-range flight and aerial refueling. In addition, there were another 86 former H-53 qualified pilots identified, most of whom had fairly recent Special Operations Forces (SOF) or rescue experience. . . . The real question to be addressed is: is transition to a new and highly complex mission in the same aircraft more or less difficult for an experienced pilot to master than transition to an aircraft variant in the same mission? . . . Transitioning from an HH or CH-53 to an RH-53 requires only learning a few new flight parameters and slightly altering already established procedures, something every experienced pilot has done several times.

"Teaming carefully selected pilots of all services, with a heavy weight on USAF SOF/rescue and USMC assault experience, would most likely have produced the most competent crews at an earlier date.

"While this issue was not crucial to the mission, it does indicate the importance of designating an operational helicopter unit responsible for maintaining mission capability in this area."[25]

CHAPTER V

THE CONCLUSIONS

There are numerous lessons learned from a hindsight review of what has been dubbed the "Desert Debacle".[1] Most of these deal with a micro assessment of JTF performance, such as: use of the principles of war; intelligence requirements; the plans review process; joint training; readiness; and pilot selection. Each misses or avoids the macro assessment of our top leaderships' performance. In this broad view, two significant problems can be identified which serve as the root of subsequent failures and oversights. These two problems were: the ad hoc organization, command and control relationships; and OPSEC. From these seeds grew failures at both the JCS and JTF levels.

The decision by the CJCS not to use an existing JTF had devastating results which were magnified by over emphasis on OPSEC compartmentalization. The failure of the JCS to anticipate the hostage crisis in consonance with the continuing deterioration of relations with Iran cannot be excused. The JCS should never have acted as the primary plan's review group. In doing so, they relegated themselves to positions as high ranking action officers who did not possess the detailed expertise to be

involved in planning. Apparently, it was this nearness to plan development and review that skewed their judgment and created false optimism. Their final failure was the inaccurate assessment of risk and chance of success. In the final analysis, the CJCS mistakenly reported JTF readiness and recommended to the President of the United States a plan that had never been thoroughly rehearsed and which was ignorant of the most important piece of intelligence - - the exact location of the hostages in the embassy compound..

The JTF's over emphasis on OPSEC tainted judgment and resulted in the acceptance of less than ideal solutions. The continuing ad hoc nature of the JTF planning process, training management, and command and control unnecessarily complicated an already complex operational plan. The JTF commander's decision to forego thoroughly integrated, combined, joint training exercises was an oversight with dire consequences. How the JTF assessed mission readiness is a mystery even today! But to think they would have reported themselves ready for such an important mission without completely evaluating the plan with a thorough realistic rehearsal is hard to believe.

When asked what he had learned from the operation and how similar failures could be avoided in the future, Col. Beckwith replied,

"If Coach Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama put his quarterback in Virginia, his backfield in North Carolina, his offensive line in Georgia, and his defense in Texas, and then had Delta Airlines to pick them up and fly them to Birmingham on game day, he wouldn't have his winning record. Coach Bryant's teams, the best he can recruit, practice together, live together, eat together, and play together. He has a team.

"In Iran we had an ad hoc affair. We went out, found bits and pieces, people and equipment, brought them together occassionally and then asked them to perform a highly complex mission. The parts all performed, but they didn't necessarily perform as a team. Nor did they have the same motivation.

"My recommendation is to put together an organization which contains everything it will ever need, an organization which would include Delta, the Rangers, Navy SEALS, Air Force pilots, its own staff, its own support people, its own aircraft and helicopters. Make this organization a permanent military unit. Give it a place to call home. Allocate sufficient funds to it. And give it sufficient time to recruit, assess, and train its people. Otherwise, we are not serious about combating terrorism."[2]

The Holloway Commission's findings corroborated Beckwith's recommendation. Today such a unit exists; ready to execute the next 'EAGLE CLAW' mission. It is unfortunate this Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) was born of failure - - but at least it was conceived!

A final salute to the professionalism and readiness of Delta, Air Force aircraft and aircrews, and the Marine pilots. Each was ready and willing to attempt the impossible for their countrymen. Regretably, the President's senior advisors and our senior military leadership were not equal to the task.

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING of PLANNING GUIDANCE

6 November 1979	NSC considers three military options: rescue attempt; retaliatory bombing; and seizure of Iranian oil fields.[1]
9 November 1979	President Carter issues guidance for launching a retaliatory strike <u>after</u> the hostages are released.[2]
23 November 1979	NSC meets at Camp David to consider the following courses of action against Iran: condemnation, threaten, break relations, mine three harbors, bomb Abadan, total blockade.[3]
19 December 1979	NSC meets to reassess strategy and consider the use of covert operations.[4]
23 December 1979	Soviet Union invades Afghanistan complicating our use of military options and forcing use of military restraint.[5]
25 January 1980	Bani-Sadr elected Iranian President; our hopes increase for reaching diplomatic solution.[6]
11 March 1980	NSC recommends to President Carter the seizure of Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf and blockading of ports.

	Kharg Island was to be held until Iran released the hostages.[7]
18 March 1980	President Carter decides to increase pressure on Iran and issues a deadline for a negotiated settlement.[8]
22 March 1980	President Carter briefed on rescue plan.[9]
1 April 1980	Negotiations with Iran collapse.[10]
7 April 1980	President Carter decides on full scale economic sanctions and a break in diplomatic relations with Iran.[11]
10 April 1980	NSC recommends the conduct of the rescue mission and a simultaneous retaliatory bombing strike.[12]
11 April 1980	President Carter decides to attempt rescue at an NSC meeting; JCS selects 24 April 1980 as the day to begin operation.[13]
16 April 1980	President Carter meets with mission commanders and approves plan but advises CJCS to avoid wanton killing.[14]
23 April 1980	President Carter disapproves use of a simultaneous retaliatory bombing strike.[15]

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#414

07 MAY 1992

Ref: 92-FOI-0640/L

Mr. Tim Rathbone
9611 Del Mar
Hesperia, CA 92345

Dear Mr. Rathbone:

This responds to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request of March 16, 1992, to the National Defense University (NDU) which was received in this Directorate on March 31, 1992. Our interim response of April 6, 1992, refers.

The National Defense University has advised that the enclosed document is responsive to your request and has been granted in part. Colonel Philip W. Gaskins, Chief of Staff, an Initial Denial Authority, has denied a portion of the enclosed document pursuant to 5 USC 552:

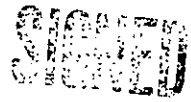
--(b)(6); information the release of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy of an individual.

You have the right to appeal Colonel Gaskins' decision to deny this information. Any such appeal should offer justification to support reversal of the initial denial and should be forwarded within 60 calendar days of the date of this letter, to:

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense
(Public Affairs)
Directorate for Freedom of Information
and Security Review
Pentagon, Room 2C757
Washington, DC 20301-1400.

There are no assessable fees for this response in this instance.

Sincerely,



W. M. McDonald
Director
Freedom of Information
and Security Review

Enclosure:
As stated

CYT/CURRY:sc:grant in part:920507:gr_/_pk_____yl_____wh_____

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