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The Nonrescue of Corvette 03©

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Editorial Abstract: "These things we do so that others may live" is the motto of Air Force rescue forces. However, sometimes a combination of factors such as a shoot-down location in a high-threat environment, not having aircraft available to search for survivors, having inadequate radios, or using difficult command and control structures can impede a successful rescue. Although the lessons learned from Corvette 03 seem to repeat the nonrescue of a fighter crew in North Vietnam 18 years earlier, these lessons have initiated immediate and long-lasting improvements in search-and-rescue operations.

The news was bad. An American fighter had been shot down deep in enemy territory. Both crew members were on the ground and slightly hurt. Rescue efforts were ongoing, and rescuers had established contact with the pilot and the weapon systems officer (WSO) using their call sign, Jackal 33. Nevertheless, because of political constraints, recovery efforts were delayed. It was late December 1972, and Air Force and Navy aircraft were pummeling North Vietnam as part of Linebacker II.

The crew of the downed F-111A, Capt Robert Sponeybarger, pilot, and Lt William Wilson, WSO, were located about 50 miles west of Hanoi. Although landing together in their aircraft's survival capsule, they were now separated by several hundred yards of dense jungle. Rescue forces located in Thailand worked tirelessly to rescue them, and fighter aircraft passing through the area were able to determine the general location of both. The rescue task force had to wait for two days because of a bombing halt that the president had directed. Unfortunately, enemy forces were nearby and used the respite to capture Sponeybarger. When the bombing halt ended, Jolly 73, an HH-53 Jolly Green from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron based at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, was able to get into the area and locate Wilson. However, as they came to a hover and, using the recovery cable, began lowering the aircrew extraction device, enemy gunners opened up on the vulnerable helicopter. As the bullets whizzed by, Wilson made a dash for the Jolly Green's jungle penetrator. Within inches of reaching that objective, the WSO lost his footing and fell down an embankment. Then a heavy-caliber machine gun put several bullets through the Jolly Green's windscreen just above the pilots' helmets. Capt R. D. Shapiro, the HH-53's aircraft commander, quickly reassessed the situation and decided to depart instead of repositioning for another attempt—the enemy's reaction was just too intense.

As they headed west, the helicopter crew soon discovered that the hostile fire had damaged their aircraft and rendered it unable to in-flight refuel. Although they did not have enough fuel to reach Thailand, they were able to land on a mountain in northern Laos and a backup helicopter soon picked them up. A third helicopter landed near the stranded HH-53 to recover its classified equipment, but hostile fire forced them to depart. A-1E Sandys were then given the order to destroy Jolly 73 to prevent it and its equipment from falling into enemy hands.

The North Vietnamese captured Wilson the next day as he tried to evade. The combination of political constraints and the intense enemy reaction had foiled a successful rescue attempt.¹

Does history repeat itself? It is a pungent question.

A little more than 19 years later, American and allied air forces were engaged in another strategic air campaign. This time, the enemy was Iraq, and “Desert Storm” was the conflict’s designation. Initial strikes began on January 17, 1991, directed at strategic targets and the Iraqi air defenses. By the third day, Iraqis started firing surface-to-surface “Scud” missiles at Israel. Although they were relatively inaccurate and had little tactical value, strategically they could affect the allied coalition against Iraq if they were successful in goading the Israelis into a response. Lt Gen Charles A. “Chuck” Horner, dually assigned as the commander of US Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) and the joint force air and space component commander (JFACC), was ordered to attack the missiles. He, in turn, directed Brig Gen Buster C. Glosson, his director of operations, to plan and execute the attacks. Glosson saluted smartly and immediately went to work in the tactical air control center (TACC).

A package of 24 new F-15Es from the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) based at Al Kharj Air Base, Saudi Arabia, was diverted from other preplanned missions to hit the suspected Scud missile sites and supporting targets in western Iraq. Coming less than six hours before takeoff, the changes caused near chaos among the crews as they scrambled to collect intelligence and request support assets to attack the sites. The area was extremely dangerous because of all the enemy defenses in the immediate vicinity.

Flying as the number-three aircraft in Corvette flight was Col David W. “Dave” Eberly, the wing director of operations, and Maj Thomas E. “Tom” Griffith. Eberly was a last-minute change, having volunteered to fill a hole in the schedule.

As the aircrews walked to their jets, they received the actual aim points, or desired mean points of impact (DMPI), that they were to use during their attacks. As they programmed their onboard flight computers, the assigned time-over-targets (TOT) were changed twice. Lt Col “Scottie” Scott, Corvette flight leader, said to Colonel Eberly, “This thing is a goat rope. It’s the kind of mission that gets people killed.”

Silently, Eberly concurred. He knew there were SA-2s and SA-3s in the target area, and the ALQ-135 jamming pod on his aircraft did not have a capability against those surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. He would have to rely on the supporting F-4Gs and EF-111s to suppress the SAM sites.²

The situation continued to worsen after their takeoff. Corvette flight had trouble finding their assigned refueling tankers in the thick clouds. Then they learned that their supporting F-4G Wild Weasels had not received the new TOTs and would not be on station when they entered the target area.

As the strike aircraft flew west, their misfortune continued. Scott had requested and been given EF-111 jamming support. A flight of two had arrived on station and set up their orbits to electronically jam the Iraqi missile sites. Soon afterwards, however, an Iraqi MiG-25 took off from its home base, intent on downing them. It avoided engagement by allied air-to-air units and fired three missiles at the two EF-111s as it darted through their orbits. Both EF-111 pilots took evasive action and defeated the missiles. However, those defensive reactions forced the two aircraft out of their jamming orbits. Not knowing where the MiG had gone and not having an autonomous self-defense capability, the two pilots turned south and headed for the safety of Saudi airspace. The F-15Es entered the dangerous skies of western Iraq without their planned F-4G and EF-111 support.³

Scott led Corvette flight toward their assigned sites, unaware that his flight had also lost its electronic-jamming support. Thirty miles from the targets, they began seeing the airbursts of radar-controlled antiaircraft artillery (AAA). At 10 miles, they came under attack from SA-2 and SA-3 radar-directed missiles. Corvette 01 and 02 made their attacks. Just as Corvette 03 was about to release his bombs, Eberly’s radar-warning receiver indicated that an SA-2 was tracking his aircraft. Almost immediately, he spotted a missile approaching from the right; he aggressively broke into its path, defeated it, and watched it streak by. He then rolled back to the left to continue his attack when the bright-white explosion of an undetected second missile violently rocked his aircraft.

Eberly scanned the instrument panel and was overwhelmed by the rapid illumination of an ever increasing number of warning lights. The missile had ripped apart his aircraft, and it was dying fast. In the backseat, Tom Griffith tried to make a “Mayday” call on the radio. Instinctively, Eberly grabbed the ejection handle and pulled it—the designed ejection sequence functioned properly and immediately ejected Griffith. After the short but proper delay, Eberly was ejected from what was left of the aircraft.⁴

Both men floated down through the bitterly cold night air. Griffith landed uneventfully. Eberly, however, had been knocked out by the ejection and was confused as he came to on the ground. He had not taken any refresher courses in combat survival during Desert Shield. Nor, because of the circumstances, had he taken time to develop a premission evasion plan with the intelligence section back at Al Kharj. As his head began to clear, he grabbed his parachute and moved away from his ejection seat, leaving the rest of his survival kit behind.

Since the two men could not see each other, Eberly took out his PRC-90 survival radio and made an emergency call, “This is Chevy—.” He stopped, and then remembered that Chevy had been his call sign on a previous mission. He started again, “This is Corvette 03 on guard. How do you read?” There was no answer. Sensing Griffith, who also had a PRC-90, was not too far away, he continued his efforts and soon made contact with his crewmate. Visibility was good; using various distinctive landmarks, they were able to rendezvous within 15 minutes.

Griffith had all of his survival gear. Together, they moved off to the southwest. As the sun came up, Griffith could see that Eberly had a gash in the back of his head and a bad scrape on his face. He tended to him as best he could. Then they wrapped themselves in the parachute and got some sleep.

Corvette 01 had quickly contacted an orbiting early warning aircraft and reported that Corvette 03 was down. They, in turn, immediately notified the joint rescue coordination center (JRCC). The center was physically colocated in the TACC for good reason. General Horner, as directed by USCINCCENT OPLAN 1002-90, was also responsible for theater rescue, and the JRCC, under the direction of Lt Col Joe Hampton, carried out that responsibility. Although each service component retained primary responsibility for carrying out its own recoveries, they would contact the JRCC whenever they needed help. During the buildup for the war, the Air Force did not deploy any rescue helicopters to the theater; so, when CENTAF needed helicopter support, it would have to ask one of the components. Approval, however, was not automatic because each component retained operational control (OPCON) of its own assigned assets. The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) had deployed squadrons of MH-53s and MH-60s into Saudi Arabia. These were the optimum helicopters to fly deep recovery missions into Iraq, but they were under the OPCON of Special Operation Command Central (SOCCENT).

SOCCENT also had Navy and Army helicopters assigned to it, and as those forces arrived in theater, it spread them out over many airfields in Saudi Arabia. The commander of SOCCENT was Col Jesse Johnson, US Army. His top airman was Col George Gray, commander of the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW), based at Hurlburt Field, Florida, and the parent wing of the MH-53s and MH-60s. Also with him was Col Bennie Orrell, his director of operations. This was fortuitous because Orrell had been a career rescue pilot, had received the Air Force Cross for a daring 1972 rescue in Laos, and knew combat rescue better than any man alive.

Combat search and rescue (CSAR) was SOCCENT’s first and primary mission during the entire conflict. Upon arrival, its various assets immediately prepared to execute rescue missions. However, Colonel Gray repeatedly emphasized that his crews could not perform the entire CSAR mission. CSAR was a process that involved locating, authenticating, and recovering downed airmen. His helicopters could not do the search-and-locate portion—especially in high-threat areas. Combat in Southeast Asia (SEA) had shown that helicopters were too vulnerable to enemy missiles and guns—Iraq had untold thousands of them.

During recoveries, AFSOC helicopters, equipped with highly accurate global positioning systems (GPS), could quickly and precisely navigate to the known location of downed aircrews, make the pickup, and quickly dart out

of high-threat areas—but they could not be expected to loiter there. Johnson and Gray established three criteria for launching their helicopters on recovery missions: (1) location of the survivor(s); (2) evidence of aircrew survival, either a visual parachute sighting or an aircrew's authenticated voice transmission;⁵ and (3) favorable enemy-threat analysis.⁶

Following the Vietnam War, the Air Force developed satellites and intelligence-collection capabilities, such as the RC-135V/W Rivet Joint aircraft, which, theoretically, have the ability to locate downed crewmen in enemy territory with a reasonable level of accuracy. However, this capability had not yet been tested in combat.⁷ On the second day of the campaign, SOCCENT had made an unsuccessful attempt to pick up a downed F-16 pilot. Although the Iraqis had immediately captured the pilot and made the recovery impossible, the MH-53 crews had proved that with good intelligence and accurate navigational data, they could fly into enemy territory and operate in relative safety.

The news of Corvette 03's shoot down arrived in the JRCC at a busy time; it was a hectic night with numerous reports of aircraft down and emergency beacons being detected. The JRCC controllers had to sort through the data and determine whether there were, in fact, survivors and then locate them. One of the members of Corvette flight reported that the aircraft had gone down at the approximate coordinates of 34°13' north, 040°55' east, about 10 miles southwest of the target area near Al Qaim. That was a start, but considering that location was reported by an aircraft which was itself under fire and moving at over 500 miles per hour—covering a mile every seven seconds—the confidence in the accuracy of the location was not good enough to launch the vulnerable helicopters into such a high-threat area. Search-and-rescue satellites (SARSAT) also reported location data, but that system's circular error probable (CEP) (the area in which 50 percent of the survivors should be found) was also too large to commit helicopters to a rescue attempt.

Colonel Hampton, the JRCC director, remembered how the data flowed in: “We knew they punched out. We had intel [intelligence] on them from the RC-135 that the Iraqis were looking for them for a while and one ground group said that they had captured them.”⁸

Hampton wanted to launch helicopters immediately, but he did not have the authority to do so.⁹ In accordance with the theater CSAR plan, the JRCC passed the data to SOCCENT where Colonel Gray began to intensively study the situation. He could stage MH-53s along with supporting MH-130 tanker aircraft out of Arar Air Base in northwestern Saudi Arabia.

Gray also had the assets of Proven Force to consider. Those were US forces that had been deployed from Europe to Turkey to open a second front in the north. Its aircraft included a task force of MH-53s and MH-130 tankers. Helicopters from either location would need the tanker support because of the long ranges involved. That would put more men at risk because that section of Iraq was one of the most highly defended areas in the entire country and extremely dangerous.¹⁰ Looking at the map, Gray divided Iraq into two sections. Above latitude 33°30' north, he would task Proven Force forces; below that latitude, he would use forces located in Saudi.

JRCC did not report an accurate position for the aircrew, or even if they were alive and free, when they passed the mission to the SOCCENT. Although Gray would not send his helicopters in to do a search, it did appear though, that the general area in which they could expect to find the men, if they were alive and still free, was above the dividing line. Gray, therefore, suggested to Colonel Johnson, his boss, that they pass the mission and what was known to the Proven Force crews.¹¹ Johnson concurred, and the JRCC sent an alert message to the crews in Turkey, who, in turn, began their initial planning.¹²

Throughout the night and next morning, the JRCC worked with various intelligence assets to determine the status and refine the position of the survivors. They alerted the various collection elements to be vigilant for any radio calls from the two men. Such transmissions would be dangerous for the survivors; the Iraqis had excellent homing capabilities and could track any calls they might make using their PRC-90 radios. Additionally,

intelligence sources suspected the Iraqis of setting off SAR beacons as tactical deception decoys.¹³ The JRCC had to resolve the unknowns and refine the data to avoid potential traps.

Additionally, Gen Buster Glosson indicated that there were some things going on behind the scenes, which indicated that “other” governmental agencies were also working to rescue the two men. That possibility was discussed at SOCCENT, and the JRCC personnel were aware that some other possible options were being considered.¹⁴

Johnson concurred with Gray’s suggestion to request access through Syrian airspace to enable a possible helicopter mission from Turkey and forward the request up the line to United States Central Command (USCENTCOM). They, in turn, made a formal request through diplomatic channels for authorization to use Syrian airspace. USCENTCOM expected Syrian approval since it was an ally in the war.¹⁵

As Eberly and Griffith slept, intelligence sources picked up new signals that seemed to indicate another downed aircraft in the area. They monitored what sounded like a Mayday call from someone using the call sign of “Crest 45A.” The JRCC quickly checked with the TACC and the Proven Force command center and determined that this call sign had not been used.¹⁶ A couple of hours later, intelligence reported that Bedouins in the area had apparently found the wreckage, but not the crew, of Corvette 03 and had reported it to a nearby Iraqi air defense unit.¹⁷ Also during that time period, a civilian entered the American Embassy in Amman, Jordan, claiming that he had information that Eberly was alive and suggested that he could turn him over to the American government for a reward. It took time to investigate this bogus claim.¹⁸

As time passed, there seemed to be little happening, and some of the TACC personnel began to question what appeared to be a lack of activity by the rescue forces. Capt Randy O’Boyle, an MH-53 pilot assigned in the TACC, began to take heat from some of the fighter guys. He remembered that when some of the F-15 guys were giving him grief, he said, “Look, next time you’re out there flying around, why don’t you just descend down to altitude, drop your gear, drop your flaps, and just go look for somebody on the ground in one of those spots where you think there is somebody. And, as soon as you get him, then you let us know. You just can’t go trundling into some place in a high threat environment without knowing exactly where the guy is.”¹⁹ His view was shared by Col Ben Orrell:

I’m not kidding. You could see those Paves [MH-53s] 50 miles off. There was no hiding them. That’s a big ole’ slow moving target—I was reluctant to go cruising in there in the daytime. There certainly may have been a situation where we would have done it, but if you don’t have a guy talking to you on the radio, it’s pretty hard to convince me to send another two or three crews in there. . . . The only way we were going to survive as a rescue force in that environment was to fly at night. And, I don’t think that the fast movers [fighter pilots] ever accepted the fact that we were not just going to come plunging in there in daytime like we had done in Vietnam. Had we done that, we’d have lost more [crews].²⁰

However, that was exactly what the F-15E crews expected. When Eberly did not return, Lt Col Bob Ruth, his assistant, became the wing’s acting director of operations. As Ruth remembered, “When we were over in SEA, if an airplane went down, we did dedicate just about any air we could to try to suppress the area to try to get the survivors out.”²¹ But that was not happening here. The F-15Es were held for the anti-Scud missions. Colonel Ruth reflected on that when he said, “Everybody just kept doing his mission, and everything was handed over to the [C]SAR folks.”²²

During the day, several strike flights flew through the Al Qaim area. As each would pass, Eberly or Griffith would attempt to make contact. One of those groups was a flight of four F-16s from the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), led by its commander, Lt Col Ed Houle. As with Corvette on the previous night, his mission had also been a last-minute change. Originally, he had been part of a 40-ship package of F-16s, F-15s, and other assorted support aircraft that had planned an attack against a target in Baghdad. Well into the planning process, they had been broken up into smaller packages and directed to hit Scud sites in west Iraq.

During Houle's preparation and briefings for the new mission, no one told him that a crew had been shot down in the Al Qaim area the day before. Approaching his target he heard, "This is Corvette 03, does anybody read?" Not expecting such a call, he let it pass and remained focused on striking his well-defended target that had very active AAA and SAM sites. Upon leaving the area, he checked with the airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft and asked, "Hey, who is Corvette 03?" The controller responded, "Why, did you hear something?" Ed replied that he had and told him what he had heard; the controller thanked him and directed him to return to his base.

Landing back at his base and now fully suspicious, he walked into intelligence for the mission debrief and asked, "Who the hell is Corvette 03?" The intelligence officer informed Houle that Corvette 03 was an F-15E that had been shot down in the Al Qaim area during the previous night and that rescue forces were trying to locate the crew. Houle's cockpit mission tape was pulled and forwarded to the 4th TFW, where unit members identified the voice as that of Colonel Eberly.

This all came as a complete surprise to Houle; neither he nor anybody in the flight had been briefed that there was a downed aircrew in that area. If they had, they would have been on the lookout for them. Houle made sure that the premission briefing procedures were changed to ensure that all of his pilots were briefed on downed crews and CSAR efforts going on in any areas in which they would be flying. Houle went a step further and passed this procedure to the JRCC, who then began to send out information on all downed aircrews to all units, and then updated the report every 12 hours. Houle also suggested to higher authorities that downed aircrews use the term Mayday instead of just talking on the radio. That way, they would get the immediate attention of any listening aircrews.²³

That evening, Chevy 06, another flight of F-15Es, was passing through the area, and one of its crews made momentary voice contact with one of the downed airmen. Chevy 06's position at that time was almost 30 miles southwest of the target area and did not correlate with any other reports. Lt Col Steve Turner was the flight lead of Chevy 06 and Griffith's squadron commander; he was certain that he had just talked to Griffith.²⁴

After returning from his mission, Turner called the JRCC and spoke with some of the controllers. When asked, he confirmed that he had not asked either man any private questions to authenticate their identities. Nevertheless, since he had served with Griffith for three years, he was adamant and absolutely certain that it was Griffith on the radio. Turner then became very insistent that more be done to get them out. He was coming to the opinion that the rescue forces were slow-rolling them for some reason. When told of the difficulties that they were having locating the guys, he suggested, strongly, that an F-15E be sent in, not as part of a strike package but specifically to find the guys.²⁵ He was told that the F-15Es were needed to hit targets and that CENTAF would send in F-15Cs to search.²⁶

The 4th TFW commander was also upset, called the JRCC, and, as quoted by one of his young majors, asked, "Is this incompetence or is it just sheer cowardice?"²⁷ Tension was building in the TACC to do something to rescue the aircrew. Some wanted to send the helicopters regardless; others were more cautious. Lt Col Joe Hampton took direct action to help find the accurate location of the survivors, saying, "Every mission that went up into that area we tasked to make radio calls, to monitor the frequencies. We tried everything that we could in order to make contact with those guys."²⁸

Consternation from the apparent lack of action spread through the 4th TFW. Maj Richard Crandall, another F-15E pilot, said, "You can't believe how angry we were that they were not going up there looking for those guys. We were so angry that Al Gale and I actually proposed to take a vehicle and drive up there to get them."²⁹

Colonel Gray was the one who was holding the line. He knew that without good authentication that the voices on the radio were, in fact, Eberly and Griffith, it could be an Iraqi trap. The North Vietnamese had done this numerous times in SEA, and he did not want to lose a helicopter crew or fighter escort to the enemy in this war. Solid procedures were in place to authenticate downed crewmen, but they were not being followed, and he had

no control over that. That was the JRCC's business. Although the pressure was building to do something, he did not want to commit a helicopter crew until he was sure.³⁰

Although Colonel Hampton, the JRCC director, was not hopeful about the chances of recovery or even their ability to make a successful effort, he said,

The guys could have still been down there, and if you can do it without losing anybody to do it, great. But as far as pushing for a mission at that point, we weren't in that position, and we left it up to the SOC [SOCCENT] guys to determine. If you want to go in there and do it, fine, okay—but we didn't agree on coordinates. We had a position that was farther to the east. Why they went to where they did I think was based on some cuts from an RC-135. I'm not sure that was a real good position on the guys. That was probably two-day-old data at that time, and if your RC-135 is down here [in Saudi] and you're doing DF up to that position . . . I know their gear is sophisticated; however there's got to be some precision there.³¹

Up at Batman Air Base in Turkey, the Proven Force MH-53 crews were busy planning contingencies. They were collecting all available information, although this was a very difficult task at such a remote location. Given the general area of the survivors, it was obvious to them that flying east in Turkey to get into Iraq and then southwest to the Al Qaim area was much too long and dangerous. Capt Steve Otto, an MH-53 pilot, remembered the obvious and said that if we stayed in Turkish and Iraqi airspace, "We simply would not have the range to make it down towards Al Qaim. So, given the threat and that large obstacle in the tri-border area, we knew that if we were going to get to Al Qaim, we were going to have to fly over Syria. We started asking for overflight permission to go through Syria."³²

But that was not all that concerned the Pave Low pilots. Again, as Otto remembered,

We had a call-sign, but we did not have any survivor data or any ISOPREP information. Perhaps more disturbing was that we had three last known positions and they were in a triangle which was about 20 miles on each leg. The bad part about it is that had it been in a low-threat area, it would have been no big deal, and we probably would have been less intimidated. But the Al Qaim area had very intense AAA and SAM defenses. We knew that that was one of the early target areas, and Corvette 03 had been shot down striking targets in that vicinity. . . . This was really an intensely defended area.³³

Back at Al Kharj, after listening to the tape that Ed Houle had forwarded to the 4th TFW, Col Bob Ruth was convinced of Eberly's voice and had it flown to the JRCC. There, Hampton and his controllers listened to it, and with the conviction of the 4th TFW guys that it really was their guys, they gave their assurances to Colonel Gray at SOCCENT. Gray became convinced of positive voice contact, acquiesced, and directed that a mission be launched. He formally tasked the combat rescue forces in Turkey, and the timing of his decision was such that those forces could still execute that night in the dark—their preferred method of operations. However, other issues existed that had the potential to delay the mission. Capt Grant Harden and Captain Otto, the two Pave Low pilots, felt that they did not have enough solid data to properly plan and execute the mission. They immediately elevated the matter to their squadron commander; he went to work to get them better data, especially a more precise location for the survivors.³⁴ The other issue was that Turkey, still skittish about the entire Proven Force operation, had refused them launch authority. By the time these issues were resolved, they had lost the night.³⁵

Getting into the Al Qaim area in a helicopter was a tough tactical challenge due to the high level of enemy defenses. Colonel Gray had already concluded that any approach from the south with his helicopters and their tankers would be almost suicidal. From the north, the problem was similar; any approach that came down out of the mountains along the Turkish-Iraqi border and then flew across the flat midland of Iraq would be just as dangerous. However, an approach through Syria looked much safer and was the route Gray had recommended at the beginning. Syria had not yet granted a flight clearance for the mission and, instead, had recommended that they send in a Syrian team to pick up the two American flyers. To add further confusion, a Bedouin

tribesman had come to the American Embassy in Jordan claiming to have a “blood chit” from one of the flyers and wanted to trade the two men for a new truck.³⁶ All of this political wrangling resulted in further delays.

Eberly’s spirits soared the next day when he heard what was obviously the execution of a CSAR effort. He called on the radio, but was abruptly told to clear the frequency because a rescue operation was going on—it just was not for him and his WSO. It was, in fact, for a Navy F-14 crew who had gone down well to the east.

At the JRCC, Hampton continued to task every aircraft going into that area to listen for and try to locate the two men.³⁷ That evening an F-15C pilot, Mobil 41, made contact with the men. He heard their emergency beacon and directed them to go to the backup frequency.

Switching over, one of the downed aircrew said, “Go ahead.”

Mobil 41 responded, “We are just trying to get hold of you to see if you’re still around. What is your physical condition?”

Eberly responded, “Physical condition is good. Alpha and Bravo are together. We are approximately 10 miles northwest of [garbled].”

Mobile 41 responded, “Corvette 03, we read you. Will be flying closer to get better radio contact.”

Anxious, Eberly asked, “Do [you] understand our position?”

At that point, somebody came on the frequency and shouted, “SAR in effect, get off of this frequency.”

It was a repeat of what had happened earlier in the day. The interloper did not identify himself. But Mobil 41 was not able to reestablish contact with the crew of Corvette 03, verify their position, or authenticate their transmissions.

Eberly reluctantly concluded that they were not going to be rescued. He talked it over with Griffith, and they decided that since they were so close to Syria, they would attempt to walk out. They had an out-of-date map and felt that they had a fairly good idea of where they were. They set out walking north and although they encountered some Bedouin camps and even some vehicles, they remained undetected.

As they approached what they thought might be the Iraqi-Syrian border, Eberly took out his radio and unsuccessfully attempted to make some more calls. He then spotted what appeared to be an abandoned building; both men were cold soaked and the idea of being inside, sheltered from the wind, was very appealing. Eberly was also very dehydrated and needed some clean water. As he looked through one of the windows to see if it was safe, a dozen soldiers ran out of the building, and on that cold, early morning they were captured.³⁸

Eberly and Griffith’s capture was unknown to the rescue forces, who did realize, however, that no one had been able to contact the two downed airmen. Throughout the day, the strike flights that hit targets in the Al Qaim area had continued to call for Corvette 03 with no result. Intelligence assets kept an ear tuned for any sign of the men but detected nothing. Colonel Johnson, the SOCCENT commander, discussed the mission and reviewed all the known data with the Special Operations Command, United States European Command (SOCEUR) commander. Finally satisfied that the mission had a reasonable chance of success, Johnson directed that the rescue mission be executed, contingent on the Syrians’ approval to use their airspace.

The Proven Force crews were primed and ready to go in that night. Captain Harden and Captain Otto would again fly the two MH-53s, but this time with better intelligence and the necessary data on the survivors. They planned to make the flight through Syria, escorted by MC-130 tanker aircraft. Their arrival in the Al Qaim area

would be coordinated with several air strikes designed to divert the attention of the SAM and AAA sites. SOCCENT and the planners at Batman felt that the supporting air strikes and use of Syrian airspace would give the rescue helicopters and crews the best chance of success and survival.

At launch time, Otto, Harden, their crews, and their massive MH-53s were ready. On board each helicopter were two pilots, two flight engineers, two door gunners, two pararescuemen (PJ), a combat controller, and an Army special forces team for ground security. Although the Syrians had still not approved the use of their airspace, Otto and Harden received direction to launch when they reported ready.

They started engines and took off; as they approached Syrian airspace the command center told them to press on to the objective area, without receiving the necessary clearance. Twenty minutes later Otto and Harden were notified that Syrian approval had been received; that message was confirmed by numerous additional satellite communication (SATCOM) radio calls, which soon became a distraction.

They flew south toward Al Qaim for two hours at about 100 feet above the ground and on a flight path that paralleled the Iraqi-Syrian border. There was no moon, but starlight illumination was enough for their night-vision equipment to be effective. Capt Matt Shozda was serving as Harden's copilot and found the flying that night to be very challenging. They had not yet gotten used to flying blacked out over shifting sand dunes and having their attention refocused every time the radar altimeter indicated less than 10 feet above the ground.³⁹ Approaching the Euphrates River, a Syrian SA-6 site, off their right side, locked-on and tracked them before they turned to defeat it.⁴⁰

Captain Harden remembered, "Our plan was to hit a final IP [initial point] and then make a run in. The run in to the exact location would be based on contact. If there were no contact, we would not go beyond the final area."⁴¹

The mission was being watched as it proceeded by nervous commanders back in the United States. Brig Gen Dale Stovall, then the vice commander at AFSOC, remembers that "we held our breath. There was a tremendous amount of pressure to send [the helicopters] in to search when we didn't have a good fixed position on those guys."⁴² He was well aware of the risks as it brought back powerful memories of Jolly Green crews sent in to North Vietnam to look for downed fighter crews in 1972. The high losses on those missions had been suffered by Stovall's squadron mates—men whose faces he could still see.

The two blacked-out helicopters now turned southeast, parallel to the Euphrates River, entered Iraq, and approached the well-defended area of Al Qaim. Low and slow, they moved toward the hold point. Captain Harden had requested that air strikes against the defending Iraqi SAMs and AAA precede their arrival. He had also requested that one fighter would arrive just ahead of the helicopters, act as an on-scene commander (OSC); that pilot would contact the survivors, authenticate their identities, and have them ready for a quick pickup. In spite of those requests, Harden recalled that "the entire sequence, as always happens, did not come off as planned. There was supposed to be a diversionary covering air strike. It was late and short. When we went in, we were supposed to have a high bird make contact. That never happened."⁴³

Without an OSC, they were on their own. Captain Otto describes how the mission proceeded:

We got down to the hold point and we started holding in kind of a "figure eight," not to fly over the same ground track. We were about a mile into Syria. Our ROE [rules of engagement] from our squadron commander was that we were not going to fly or commit into the threat area around Al Qaim unless the survivors came up on the radio. We noticed that there was a slight rise and we could stay somewhat masked. As all of this is going on, the giant light show is going on with the AAA. It was towards the strike aircraft but randomly. It wasn't guided toward us. It was just fired up into the air. Which is kind of the way they seemed to do things. We eventually got there and realized that the fighters were not going to get Corvette 03 up on the radio.

We orbited for about 5 minutes and expected to hear them call. We were on time as we got to the orbit point. It coincided perfectly with the strikers getting there.

Then eventually, Grant and his copilot Matt Shozda realized that it was just getting screwed up, and we were going to have to do our own authentication. And Grant told us to stay down low. He climbed up a couple of hundred feet, maybe 500 feet, and just started talking on the radio . . . trying to get them up on the radio. Probably after about a minute delay, we started to notice that the Iraqi AAA started to get real intense, once we had talked on the radio. And even in the aircraft, we felt that they were intercepting and DFing us. Then the fighters joined in trying to get them up on the radios. Corvette 03 only had PRC-90s. And we knew as long as we were there and talking on the radio, the odds of the mission being compromised were greater. Bottom line is that we stayed down there for almost 30 minutes orbiting and calling on the radio. Never heard a word from Corvette 03. Then, reluctantly, without radio contact, we were done. We flew back to Turkey.⁴⁴

Captain Shozda in the other aircraft had similar memories:

I got on the radio and started trying the different frequencies to contact him. Somewhere at that point, we realized that the SAR net was nothing more than a radio-controlled AAA, pilot-controlled AAA. We would key the mike and they would start firing. I told Harden, “Look! They’re DFin’ us. Watch this!” So I made a radio call and they started shooting again. He told me, “Cut that out!” They definitely had a trap set up for us. They were waiting for us, because the final location that we got . . . [was] in the same general area . . . [and is] where all the AAA was coming from.⁴⁵

With no contact, the two Pave Lows left the area and returned to base. Arriving at Batman, both crews went into crew rest. The next day, they were back on the alert schedule. Within a few days, their unit had established a communications link with higher headquarters that enabled them to get daily intelligence updates and a copy of the air tasking order. Whenever allied crews were flying over Iraq, MH-53 crews at Batman were on alert for combat recovery—it was their primary mission.

A few days later, the MH-53 crews at Batman got a chance to see the CNN footage taken in Baghdad on the first night of the war. They could not help concluding that the AAA seemed much less intense in Baghdad than what they had seen near Al Qaim.⁴⁶

For the next several days, flights into the Al Qaim area continued to call and listen for Corvette 03. Those efforts were to no avail since, unfortunately, that aircrew had been captured, as mentioned previously, and was on their way to Baghdad. However, the saga of Corvette 03 was not over, and the men of the 4th TFW were now very bitter about the nonrescue of their mates. Those feelings peaked a few weeks later when they saw Eberly’s face on CNN—as a POW; it hurt to see him in those, perhaps avoidable, circumstances. To a man, they had been more than ready to help in the rescue effort. Colonel Ruth remembered thinking that “if they [JRCC] had called down and said ‘Hey I need a 4-ship. Can you round up enough people?’ We would have had people . . . the planes . . . could easily have done along those lines without impacting the ATO [air tasking order]. But we were never asked.”⁴⁷

On a more personal level, a pilot expressed the feelings of the wing’s aircrews: “Our DO [director of operations] and backseater were on the ground for three and a half days in western Iraq. Nobody would go in and pick them up; and they eventually became prisoners of war. Before the war, the special operations guys came down to talk to us. ‘No sweat,’ they said, ‘We’ll come and get you anywhere you are.’ That from my perspective was a big lie. Nobody was going to come and get you.”⁴⁸ The 4th TFW commander said,

It seemed to me that the forces running the SAR wanted a perfect situation. Before they would launch they wanted to know exactly where they were, that they had been authenticated, on, and on. I mean, when we got the tape I had [Kenneth M. “Mike”] “Slammer” DeCuir, Griff’s roommate and supervisor when they were running stan eval, listen to the tape and verify that it was Griff. But those guys at JRCC would not take our word for it.

So we fly the tape to Riyadh and they say, finally, “Yep now that we have heard the voice, we believe what you heard is in fact true.” I mean it was frustrating, beyond belief, that we had to prove to others that, yes, there were people out there who needed to be picked up. What frustrated me the most was that I couldn’t push the right buttons to get the SAR going. Horner and Glosson, my bosses, would have broken their necks to get up there, but they were running the air campaign and had no control over the SAR effort.⁴⁹

Gen Buster Glosson was also frustrated by these events and remembered some heated discussions that he and Capt Randy O’Boyle had about SOCCENT’s response. O’Boyle repeated that there were places that helicopters could not safely go. As Glosson recalled,

Randy is 100% correct on that issue unless I made the decision I was willing to lose them. If I’m willing to lose them as the commander, I should have the prerogative to send a helicopter, or send two, or three, understanding I may lose one of them. That’s my decision. It should not be someone else’s decision. I am not saying you send people into harm’s way just to say you did it. But many times . . . you can assist the CSAR effort with distractions in a way that a helicopter can sneak in and not have near the exposure. During Desert Storm, AFSOC [SOCCENT] wanted to look at everything in isolation. They wanted to say, “Oh, helicopter[s] can’t get in.” Randy and I had a few conversations on this. I said, “Randy, stop letting those guys, if you can, look at this in isolation. I can make all hell break loose a quarter of a mile from where we want to pick the pilot up, I can make sure the people on the ground are only concerned about survival.” Bottom line, you can’t look at CSAR, or anything else during a war, in isolation.⁵⁰

Neither Horner nor Glosson could launch the rescue helicopters because Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf had given that responsibility and authority to the commander of SOCCENT, Colonel Johnson. Johnson’s air commanders, well schooled in the realities of rescue behind enemy lines, delayed the effort until they felt that they had the best chance of rescuing the men and not losing their helicopter crews in the process. It was an unfortunate misunderstanding fueled by the “fog of war.” The fighter guys expected to be picked up. For years, they had heard the stories of the old Vietnam vets who “knew” the rescue guys would come. However, when they did not, for reasons that they could not know or understand, they lost faith and condemned those responsible.

Yet, Colonel Gray was adamant in his logic. “I wasn’t going to send guys into a situation where we were automatically going to lose a helicopter and 5 more guys.”⁵¹

Lt Col Pete Harvell, a CENTCOM staff officer in the J-3 recovery section, watched all of this and was somewhat dismayed by the attitude of Air Force officers who, in their enthusiasm, were so quick to send special operations forces (SOF) helicopters into such a high-threat area. He said that “this is an issue of recurring special operations’ concern in that non-SOF people have a tendency to commit SOF forces in unrealistic ways. This is a recurring theme that the SOF guys have got to fight. They say, ‘Send the SOF guys.’ It’s not a SOF mission. It’s easy for them to say, ‘Mount up the SOF guys and have them do this.’ They don’t understand what our strengths and weaknesses are and what we can and cannot do.”⁵²

Concerned about the failure and its impact, the commanders in CENTAF tried to address the problem. Analysis indicated that the PRC-90 radio used by the crews was clearly inadequate for the conflict. It had the ability to use only two frequencies, which the Iraqis easily exploited and compromised. The PRC-112 was a newer and better radio, available in limited numbers. It had more frequencies and a covert transponder identification and navigation aid that provided SAR aircraft with range and bearing information out to 100 miles. Prior to the war, more than 1,000 PRC-112s were bought for SOF and Navy troops. Although the Air Force had not bought any before the war, they realized their mistake, and the director of operations for CENTAF sent a message to the Pentagon asking for several hundred radios for aircrews and homing receiver-modification kits to equip more helicopters. The MH-53 and Navy HH-60 were already modified.⁵³

Interestingly, the message did not ask for modification kits for any fighter aircraft—not the F-15s or even the A-10s assigned to rescue-support duty. Perhaps an even better choice would have been the 72 block-40 F-16 C/Ds, which were being used in the war and were equipped with integrated GPS navigation systems. Modified with that homing gear, they could locate survivors by locking their sensors on the survivor’s PRC-112 transponder. Their navigation system would then determine the precise GPS coordinates of the downed aircrew’s location, which they could pass to the MH-53s.⁵⁴

Although never explicitly stated, it seems that those aircraft were needed for other missions—hunting Scuds and destroying the Republican Guard divisions. As incredible as it seems, the availability of aircraft was incredibly tight. One scheduler noted that “with all the aircraft available in theater, I found it difficult to believe that we were actually ‘short’ [of available aircraft to strike the Scud sites]. We did, however, have that problem. With the number of packages and individual missions scheduled in the ATO, there are, in fact, very few unscheduled aircraft available.”⁵⁵

Colonel Ruth and his men were ready to fly. However, unlike in the Vietnam War, where almost-unlimited sorties were available to service very few important targets, there were limits on the number of sorties that could be produced during Desert Storm, and almost every sortie had a designated target that was a critical part of the campaign plan.

Like the F-111 crew 19 years before, Colonel Eberly and Major Griffith had not been rescued. In both cases, the aircrews had been shot down in high-threat areas, and a combination of factors had combined to prevent successful rescues. Nevertheless, rescue forces had made the effort and kept faith with their motto, “These things we do so that others may live.”

Notes

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3. Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 126.
4. Ibid.
5. Michael R. Gordon and Gen Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994), 250.
6. Brig Gen George Gray, USAF, retired (former commander of the 1st SOW), interview by the author, May 3, 2001; and *United States Special Operations Command History*, HQ USSOCOM/SOCS-HO, MacDill AFB, FL, November 1999, 36.
7. ICAO Circular 185-AN/121, *Satellite Aided Search and Rescue—The COPAS SARSAT System* (Montreal: International Civil Aeronautical Organization, 1986), 17; Brig Gen Rich Comer, interview by the author, July 19, 2000; and Supporting Document I-79, *US Air Force Rescue Force Structure Plan*, September 22, 1989.
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9. Ibid.

10. United States Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 1992), 177.
11. Gray, interview.
12. Lt Col Matt Shozda (Harden's MH-53 copilot), interview by the author, September 12, 2002.
13. Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals' War*, 258.
14. Lt Col Randy O'Boyle (MH-53 pilot assigned to the TACC), interview by the author, March 20, 2000; Hampton, interview; and Comer, interview.
15. Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals' War*, 258.
16. Time Sequence for CSAR, Corvette 03 SAR, and assorted notes. Desert Storm Box no. 2, Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, Fort Belvoir, VA.
17. Ibid.
18. Lt Col Pete Harvell (CENTCOM staff officer in the J-3 recovery section), interview by the author, January 29, 2002.
19. O'Boyle, interview.
20. Col Ben Orrell, USAF, retired (1st SOW's director of operations and combat rescue expert), interview by the author, January 17, 2002.
21. Col Bob Ruth, USAF, retired (assistant director of operations, 4th TFW), interview by the author, March 24, 2001.
22. Ibid.
23. Col Ed Houle, USAF, retired (commander, 10th TFS), interview by the author, March 28, 2001.
24. Time Sequence for Corvette 03.
25. Ibid.
26. William L. Smallwood, *Strike Eagle* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1994), 124.
27. Ibid., 123.
28. Hampton, interview.
29. Smallwood, *Strike Eagle*, 124.
30. O'Boyle, interview.
31. Hampton, interview. DF is an acronym for direction finding.
32. Lt Col Steve Otto (MH-53 pilot during rescue attempt), interview by the author, April 30, 2001.

33. Otto, interview. ISOPREP is the acronym for the “isolated personnel report” that documents unique information on an aircrew to allow for positive identification during a search-and-rescue operation.
 34. Ibid.
 35. Benjamin Schemmer, “No USAF Combat Rescue in Gulf; It Took 72 Hours to Launch One Rescue,” *Armed Forces International*, July 1991, 37.
 36. Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals’ War*, 259.
 37. Hampton, interview.
 38. Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals’ War*, 260; and *History*, 4th TFW, January–December 1991, 77.
 39. Shozda, interview.
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 41. Lt Col Grant Harden (MH-53 pilot during rescue attempt), interview by the author, May 2, 2001.
 42. Brig Gen Dale Stovall, USAF, retired (vice commander, AFSOC), interview by the author, September 3, 2001.
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 44. Otto, interview; and Harden, interview.
 45. Shozda, interview.
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 47. Ruth, interview.
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