



The mission was to rescue the hostages held in Iran,  
but it ended in disaster.

# Desert



*Iranian soldiers survey the wreckage of the aborted US military attempt to rescue hostages in the US Embassy in Tehran. Eight American servicemen died in a disastrous accident as the rescue forces pulled back from the mission.*

By Otto Kreisher

**F**OR some, the current political debate over the combat readiness of today's American military stirs memories of a long-ago event that, more than anything else, came to symbolize the disastrously "hollow" forces of the post-Vietnam era.

It began in the evening of April 24, 1980, when a supposedly elite US military force launched a bold but doomed attempt to rescue their fellow American citizens and their nation's honor from captivity in Tehran. In the early hours of April 25, the effort ended in fiery disaster at a remote spot in Iran known ever after as Desert One.

This failed attempt to rescue 53 hostages from the US Embassy in Tehran resulted in the death of five US Air Force men and three Marines, serious injuries to five other troops, and the loss of eight aircraft. That failure would haunt the US military for years and would torment some of the key participants for the rest of their lives.

One, Air Force Col. James Kyle, called it, "The most colossal episode of hope, despair, and tragedy I had experienced in nearly three decades of military service."

The countdown to this tragedy opened exactly 20 years ago, in January 1979. A popular uprising in Iran forced the sudden abdication and flight into exile of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the longtime ruler of Iran and staunch

# One



***This secretly taken photo shows how Iranian troops blanketed the streets, making it difficult for the US to obtain intelligence. The CIA's spy network had been dismantled, one of many problems facing the rescue planners.***

US ally. Brought to power in the wake of this event was a government led, in name, by Shahpur Bakhtiar and Abolhassan Bani Sadr. Within months, they, too, had been shoved aside, replaced by fundamentalist Shiite Muslim clerics led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

On Nov. 4, two weeks after President Jimmy Carter had allowed the shah to enter the US for medical care, 3,000 Iranian "student" radicals invaded the US Embassy in Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage. Chief of Mission L. Bruce Laingen and two aides were held separately at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

The students demanded that the shah be returned for trial. Khomeini's supporters blocked all efforts to free the hostages.

Thirteen black and female hostages would be released later as a "humanitarian" gesture, but the humiliating captivity for the others would drag on for 14 months.

### **Rice Bowl**

Carter, facing a re-election battle in 1980, strongly favored a diplomatic solution, but his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, directed the Pentagon to begin planning for a rescue mission or retaliatory strikes in case the hostages were harmed. In response, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. David C. Jones, established a small, secretive planning group, dubbed "Rice

Bowl," to study American options for a rescue effort.

It quickly became clear how difficult that would be.

The first obstacle was the location. Tehran was isolated, surrounded by more than 700 miles of desert and mountains in any direction. This cut the city off from ready attack by US air or naval forces. Moreover, the embassy was in the heart of the city congested by more than four million people.

A bigger hurdle, however, was the condition of the US military, which had plummeted in size and quality in the seven years since it had staged a near-total withdrawal from Vietnam. Among the casualties of the post-Vietnam cutbacks was the once-powerful array of Army and Air Force special operations forces that had performed feats of great bravery and military skill in Southeast Asia.

The one exception was an elite unit of soldiers recently formed to counter the danger of international terror. This unit, called Delta Force, was commanded by Army Col. Charles Beckwith, a combat-tested special forces officer. Delta, which had just been certified as operational after conducting a hostage rescue exercise, was directed to start planning for the real thing at the Tehran embassy.

The immediate question was how to get Delta close enough to do its job. Directing the planners who were trying to solve that riddle was Army

Maj. Gen. James Vaught, a veteran of three wars, with Ranger and airborne experience but no exposure to special operations or multiservice missions. Because of the need for extreme secrecy, he was denied the use of an existing JCS or service organization. Vaught had to assemble his planning team and the joint task force that would conduct the mission from widely scattered sources.

One of the early selections was Kyle, a highly regarded veteran of air commando operations in Vietnam, who would help plan the air mission and would be on-scene commander at Desert One.

When Beckwith ruled out a parachute drop, helicopters became the best option for reaching Tehran, despite the doubts Beckwith and other Vietnam veterans had about their reliability. Navy RH-53D Sea Stallions, which were used as airborne minesweepers, were chosen because of their superior range and load-carrying capability and their ability to operate from an aircraft carrier.

Even the Navy Sea Stallions could not fly from the Indian Ocean to Tehran without refueling. After testing and rejecting alternatives, the task force opted to use Air Force EC-130 Hercules transports rigged with temporary 18,000-gallon fuel bladders to refuel the helicopters on their way to Tehran.

### **Finding the Spot**

However, that decision led to the requirement of finding a spot in the Iranian desert where the refueling could take place on the ground. That required terrain that would support the weight of the gas-bloated Hercules.

US intelligence found and explored just such a location, about 200 miles southeast of Tehran. In planning and training, this site was known as Desert One.

Because the RH-53s were Navy aircraft, the Pentagon assigned Navy pilots to fly them and added Marine copilots to provide experience with land assault missions.

That combination soon proved unworkable, as many of the Navy's pilots were unable or unwilling to master the unfamiliar and difficult tasks of long-range, low-level flying over land, at night, using primitive night vision goggles.

In December, most of the Navy

pilots were replaced by Marines carefully selected for their experience in night and low-level flying. The mission ultimately had 16 pilots: 12 Marine, three Navy, and one Air Force.

Selected to lead the helicopter element was Marine Lt. Col. Edward Seiffert, a veteran H-53 pilot who had flown long-range search-and-rescue missions in Vietnam and had considerable experience flying with night vision goggles.

Beckwith described Seiffert as “a no-nonsense, humorless—some felt rigid—officer who wanted to get on with the job.”

Delta and the helicopter crews never developed the coordination and trust that are essential to high-stress, complex combat missions. Possibly, this was caused by the disjointed nature of the task force and its training.



**The complex rescue plan involved thousands of troops from four services, scattered around the world, and scores of aircraft, including three AC-130s to protect the rescue force from Iranian counterattack.**



**C-130s were to fly the rescue force from Masirah to Desert One. Helicopters, flown from Nimitz, would carry the rescuers to a hideout near Tehran. The next night, the commandos were to drive to the embassy to release the hostages. The helicopters then were to carry the rescuers and hostages to the abandoned Man-zariyeh air base, where C-141s would fly them to Egypt.**

While the helicopter crews worked out of Yuma, Ariz., the members of Delta Force did most of their training in the woods of North Carolina. Other Army personnel were drilling in Europe. The Air Force crews that would take part in the mission trained in Florida or Guam, thousands of miles away in the Pacific.

The entire operation was being directed by a loosely assembled staff in Washington, D.C., which insisted that all the elements had to be further isolated by a tightly controlled flow of information that would protect operational security.

“Ours was a tenuous amalgamation of forces held together by an intense common desire to succeed, but we were slow coming together as a team,” Kyle wrote in his account of the mission.

Meanwhile, Beckwith and his staff were desperate for detailed information on the physical layout of the embassy, the numbers and locations of the Iranian guards, and, most important, the location of the hostages.

### Six Buildings

Without that data, Delta had to plan to search up to six buildings in the embassy compound where the hostages might be held. That required Beckwith to increase the size of his assault force, which meant more helicopters were needed.

No intelligence was coming out of Iran because Carter had dismantled the CIA’s network of spies due to

the agency's role in overthrowing governments in Vietnam and Latin America.

It would be months before agents could be inserted into Iran to supply the detailed intelligence Beckwith said was "the difference between failure and success, between humiliation and pride, between losing lives and saving them."

Despite all the obstacles, the task force by mid-March 1980 had developed what they considered a workable plan, and all of the diverse operational elements had become confident of their ability to carry it out.

The plan was staggering in its scope and complexity, bringing together scores of aircraft and thousands of men from all four services and from units scattered from Arizona to Okinawa, Japan.

The plan was this:

On the first night, six Air Force C-130s carrying 132 Delta commandos, Army Rangers, and support personnel and the helicopter fuel would fly from the island of Masirah, off the coast of Oman, more than 1,000 miles to Desert One, being refueled in flight from Air Force KC-135 tankers.

Eight Navy RH-53Ds would lift off the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*, about 50 miles south of the Iranian coast, and fly more than 600 miles to Desert One.

After refueling, the helicopters would carry the rescue force to a hideout in hills about 50 miles southeast of Tehran, then fly to a separate hiding spot nearby. The C-130s would return to Masirah, being refueled in flight again.

The next night, Delta would be driven to the embassy in vehicles obtained by the agents. A team of Rangers would go to rescue the three Americans held in the foreign ministry.

As the ground units were freeing the hostages, the helicopters would fly from their hiding spot to the embassy and the foreign ministry.

Three Air Force AC-130 gunships would arrive overhead to protect the rescue force from any Iranian counterattack and to destroy the jet fighters at the Tehran airport.

The choppers would fly the rescue force and the freed hostages to an abandoned air base at Manzariyeh, about 50 miles southwest of Tehran, which was to be seized and protected

by a Ranger company flown in on C-130s.

The helicopters would be destroyed and C-141s, flown in from Saudi Arabia, would then fly the entire group to a base in Egypt.

### "Now a Reality"

After five months of planning, organizing, training, and a series of increasingly complex rehearsals, Kyle recalled: "The ability to rescue our people being held hostage, which didn't exist on Nov. 4, 1979, was now a reality."

The team still needed Carter's permission to execute.

Although the shah had moved to Panama and then to Egypt, the 53 Americans remained hostages and the public was getting impatient. Finally, in a White House meeting of his top advisors on April 11, Carter gave up on diplomacy. "I told everyone that it was time for us to bring our hostages home; their safety and our national honor were at stake," Carter said in his memoirs.

Five days later, Jones, Vaught, and Beckwith briefed Carter at the White House on the plans for the rescue mission and expressed their confidence in their ability to pull it off.

Beckwith recalled that Carter told them: "I do not want to undertake this operation, but we have no other recourse. ... We're going to do this operation."

Carter then told Jones, "This is a military operation; you will run it.

... I don't want anyone else in this room involved."

The audacious operation was code-named "Eagle Claw." The target date was April 24-25.

Almost immediately, forces began to move to their jump-off points. By April 24, 44 aircraft were poised at six widely separated locations to perform or support the rescue mission. The RH-53s already were on *Nimitz*, where they had been stored with minimal care for months, but a frantic effort brought them up to what Seiffert and Navy officials insisted was top mechanical condition by launch day.

Beckwith and Seiffert had agreed that they would need a minimum of six flyable helicopters at Desert One for the mission to continue. Beckwith had asked for 10 helos on the carrier to cover for possible malfunctions, but the Navy claimed they could not store more than eight on the hangar deck.

Delta and many of the Air Force aircraft staged briefly at a Russian-built airfield at Wadi Qena, Egypt, which would serve as Vaught's headquarters for the mission. While at Wadi Qena on April 23, the task force received an intelligence report that all 53 hostages were being held in the embassy's chancery. Because he was not told the solid source of that information, Beckwith did not trust it enough to reduce his assault force, which may have been a critical decision.



**RH-53s being preflighted aboard USS *Nimitz* before launching on the mission where they would be stymied by dust clouds and various systems failures. Eagle Claw was aborted when three helicopters could not complete the mission.**

The next day, with Delta Force and support elements on Masirah and the helicopter crews on *Nimitz*, Vaught received the final weather report. It promised the virtually clear weather that the mission required.

### “Execute Mission”

Vaught sent a message to all units: “Execute mission as planned. God speed.”

“There was cheering, and fists were jammed into the air with thumbs up. ... This was an emotional high for all of us,” Kyle wrote.

That emotional high would crash into despair in about 12 hours.

The mission started in the twilight of April 24 with barely a hitch. Kyle and Beckwith flew out of Masirah on the lead MC-130 Combat Talon with some of the Delta troopers and an Air Force combat controller team. At about the same time, Seiffert led the helicopter force—given the call sign of “Bluebird”—from *Nimitz* and headed to the Iranian coast, 60 miles away.

The choppers had been fitted with two advanced navigation systems, but the pilots found them unreliable and were relying mainly on visual navigation as they cruised along at 200 feet. “We were fat, dumb, and happy,” Seiffert recalled.

About 100 miles into Iran, the Talon ran into a thin cloud that reduced visibility but was not a problem at its cruise altitude of 2,000 feet. The cloud was a mass of suspended dust, called a “haboob,” common to the Iranian desert. Air Force weather experts supporting the mission knew it was a possibility but apparently never told the mission pilots. Kyle said he considered sending a warning to the helicopters but decided it was not significant.

When the MC-130 ran into a much thicker cloud later, he did try to alert Seiffert, but the message never got through. It was just one of the communications glitches that would plague the mission.

The dust cloud that was a minor irritation to the Combat Talon became an extended torture for the helicopter pilots, who were trying to fly formation and visually navigate at 200 feet while wearing the crude night vision goggles. Visibly shaken Marine fliers later told Beckwith and Kyle the hours in the milk-like dust cloud were the worst experience of



**USAF Col. James Kyle, mission planner and on-scene commander, and Army Col. Charles Beckwith, Delta Force commander, flew to Desert One in an MC-130, like this one, with Delta troopers and an Air Force combat controller team.**

their lives, which for some included combat in Vietnam.

Things had started to go wrong even before the dust cloud.

Less than two hours into the flight, a warning light came on in the cockpit of Bluebird Six. The indicator, called the Blade Inspection Method, or BIM, warned of a possible leak of the pressurized nitrogen that filled the Sea Stallion’s hollow rotors. In the H-53 models the Marines were used to flying, the BIM indicator usually meant a crack in one of the massive blades, which had caused rotor failures and several fatal crashes in the past. As a result, Marine H-53 pilots were trained to land quickly after a BIM warning.

The Navy’s RH-53s, however, had newer BIM systems that usually did not foretell a blade failure. To that date, no RH-53 had experienced a blade break and the manufacturer had determined that the helicopter could fly safely for up to 79 hours at reduced speed after a BIM alert.

### Down to Seven

However, the pilots of Bluebird Six did not know that. Thinking the craft unsafe to fly, the crew abandoned it in the desert and jumped aboard a helicopter that had landed to help.

The mission was down to seven helicopters.

Further inland, the remaining choppers were struggling with the dust cloud, which dropped visibility to yards and sent the cockpit tempera-

ture soaring. Although all the pilots were having difficulty, Bluebird Five was really suffering as progressive electrical system failures took away most of the pilot’s essential flight and navigation instruments. The pilot, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Rodney Davis, “was flying partial panel, needle-ball, wet compass—a real vertigo inducer,” Seiffert said.

Fighting against the unnerving effects of vertigo—when your inner ear tells you the aircraft is turning while your eyes tell you it is not—and unaware of the location of the other helicopters or the weather at Desert One, Davis decided to turn back.

Davis did not know that he was about 25 minutes from clear air, which prevailed all the way to Desert One, because everyone was maintaining strict radio silence to avoid detection.

The mission now was down to the minimum six helicopters.

Meanwhile, the lead C-130 had landed at Desert One, and Beckwith’s commandos had raced out to block the dirt road that traversed the site.

Within minutes, they stopped a bus with 44 persons at one end of the site and at the opposite end had to fire an anti-tank round into a gas tanker truck that refused to stop. The driver of the tanker leaped from his burning vehicle and escaped in a pickup that was following.

Despite fears the mission might be compromised, the combat con-



**Delta Force trained in North Carolina, Army personnel in Europe, helicopter crews out of Arizona, and Air Force crews in Florida or Guam. Isolated for operational security, they were slow to come together as a team.**

trollers quickly installed a portable navigation system and runway lights to guide the other mission aircraft to Desert One.

Soon, the remainder of Delta Force was on the ground and the three EC-130s were positioned to refuel the helicopters, which were supposed to arrive 20 minutes later.

But, as Kyle discovered months later, someone had miscalculated the choppers' flight time by 55 minutes and the first Bluebird was more than an hour away. Finally, the Sea Stallions lumbered in from the dark, coming in ones and twos, instead of a formation, and from different directions.

After considerable anxiety, the count was up to six helicopters on the ground at Desert One and the hopes for a successful rescue soared again.

But as the helicopters struggled through unexpected deep sand to get into position behind the tankers, one shut down its engines.

Bluebird Two had suffered a complete failure of its secondary hydraulic system, which was unrepairable and left it with minimal pressure for its flight controls. Although the pilot appeared willing to try taking his sick bird on to the hideout, Seiffert overruled him.

Kyle tried to talk Seiffert into taking the helo on, but he refused, warning that flying with the one system at such heavy weight and high temperature could result in a control lockup and a crash that would kill not only



**Two inquiries looked into the factors that left at Desert One burnt out hulks like the one above. (Note: The US-built Chinook in the background was not part of the rescue mission.) A Pentagon report blamed the helicopter failure rate and low-visibility flight conditions.**

the crew but the Delta commandos on board. Kyle then asked Beckwith if he could reduce his assault force to go with five choppers, but he was equally adamant about not changing his plans.

### **Failure of Eagle Claw**

It seemed clear the mission had to be aborted.

Kyle informed Vaught of the situation by satellite radio and the task force commander relayed that to Jones and the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, at the Pentagon. When

the word got to the White House, Carter asked Brown to get Beckwith's opinion. Told that Beckwith felt it necessary to abort, Carter said: "Let's go with his recommendation."

Eagle Claw had failed and the tense anticipation of success drained into frustration and anger.

Now Kyle was left with the unrehearsed job of getting everyone out of Iran. Because of the extended time on the ground, one of the C-130s was running low on fuel and had to leave soon. To allow that tanker to move, Kyle directed Marine Maj. James Schaefer to reposition his helicopter. With a flattened nose wheel, Schaefer could not taxi and tried to lift off to move his bird, stirring a blinding dust cloud.

As Kyle watched in horror, the helo slid sideways, slicing into the C-130

with its spinning rotors and igniting a raging fire. Red-hot chunks of metal flamed across the sky as munitions in both aircraft torched off.

Some of the Delta commandos had boarded the C-130 and they came tumbling out the side door as the Air Force loadmasters and senior soldiers tried to stop a spreading panic. Men were helping the injured away from the inferno.

The projectiles ejecting from the flaming wreckage were hitting the three nearby helicopters and their crews quickly fled.

Many of the people at Desert One that night credit Kyle with restoring order to the chaotic scene and getting all the living men and salvageable equipment out safely. But in the flaming funeral pyre of Eagle Claw's shattered hopes, they left the bodies of eight brave men.

On the departing C-130s, Delta medics treated four badly burned men, including Schaefer, his copilot, and two airmen. "We left a lot of hopes and dreams back there at Desert One, but the nightmares and despair were coming with us ... and would continue to haunt us for years, maybe forever," Kyle wrote later.

### Holloway's Investigation

Although Carter went on television the next day to announce the failure of the mission and to accept the blame, Congress and the Pentagon launched inquiries to determine the reasons for the tragedy. The Pentagon probe was handled by a board of three retired and three serving flag officers representing all four services; it was led by retired Adm. James L. Holloway III. The commission's report listed 23 areas "that troubled us professionally about the mission—areas in which there appeared to be weaknesses."

"We are apprehensive that the critical tone of our discussion could be misinterpreted as an indictment of the able and brave men who planned and executed this operation. We encountered not a shred of evidence of culpable neglect or incompetence," the report said.

The commission concluded that the concept and plan for the mission were feasible and had a reasonable chance for success.

But, it noted, "the rescue mission was a high-risk operation. ... People and equipment were called upon to perform at the upper limits of human capacity and equipment capability. There was little margin to compensate for mistakes or plain bad luck."

The major criticism was of the "ad hoc" nature of the task force, a chain of command the commission felt was unclear, and an emphasis on operational secrecy it found excessive.

The commission also said the



**The hostages were released in January 1981 after the US and Iran reached an accord involving release of frozen Iranian assets. Lt. Col David Roeder, left, and Col. Thomas E. Schaefer were two of the USAF servicemen who were among those freed.**

chances for success would have been improved if more backup helicopters had been provided, if a rehearsal of all mission components had been held, and if the helicopter pilots had had better access to weather information and the data on the RH-53s' BIM warning system.

And it suggested that Air Force helicopter pilots might have been better qualified for the mission.

However, the report also said, "The helicopter crews demonstrated a strong dedication toward mission accomplishment by their reluctance to abort under unusually difficult conditions." And it concluded that, "two factors combined to directly cause the mission abort: an unexpected helicopter failure rate and the low-visibility flight conditions en route to Desert One."

Beckwith openly blamed the helicopter pilots immediately after the mission. However, in his critique to the Senate Armed Services Committee, he attributed the failure to Murphy's Law and the use of an ad hoc organization for such a difficult mission. "We went out and found bits and pieces, people and equipment, brought them together occasionally, and then asked them to perform a highly complex mission," he said. "The parts all performed,

but they didn't necessarily perform as a team."

He recommended creating an organization that, in essence, was the prototype of the Special Operations Command that Congress mandated in 1986.

Kyle, in his book on the mission, rejected the Holloway commission's conclusions and basically blamed Seiffert and the helicopter pilots for not climbing out of the dust cloud, for not using their radios to keep the formation intact, and for the three helicopter aborts.

He argued that the task force never had less than seven flyable helicopters. All that was lacking, he wrote, was "the guts to try."

Seiffert praised Beckwith and Kyle as professional warriors but disagreed with their criticism of him and his helicopter pilots. He equated his decision to ground the chopper with the failed hydraulic system to Beckwith's refusal to cut his assault force, and he refused to second-guess the two pilots who had aborted earlier.

Seiffert said he was confident that, had they gotten to Tehran, the mission would have succeeded. Kyle was equally certain, writing that: "It is my considered opinion that we came within a gnat's eyebrow of success."

Beckwith wrote in his memoirs that he had recurring nightmares after Desert One. However, he noted, "In none have I ever dreamed whether the mission would have been successful or not." ■

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*Otto Kreisher is the national security reporter for Copley News Service, based in Washington, D.C. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "To Protect the Force," appeared in the November 1998 issue.*