



# THE NIGHT THEY Saved Vega 31

The rescue of F-117 pilot Dale Zelko was a close-run thing.

By Darrel Whitcomb

AP photo by Joel Finck



*An F-117 Nighthawk takes off from Aviano AB, Italy, at the start of Operation Allied Force.*

**O**n March 27, 1999, the fourth night of Operation Allied Force, USAF Lt. Col. Darrell P. Zelko turned his F-117 to an outbound heading, returning to Aviano Air Base in northern Italy. Zelko had reached his objective, and both of his aircraft's precision guided bombs appeared to have hit their target near Belgrade.

Zelko was flying with the call sign of Vega 31. It was his third sortie of the air war over Serbia. Deployed from the 49th Fighter Wing at Holloman AFB, N.M., he was engaged in his second combat operation. He was a veteran of the 1991 Gulf War.

However, Zelko was still deep in enemy territory. Vega 31 was west-northwest of the target area when his routine

suddenly was shattered by indications that Serbian air defense systems had targeted his aircraft. The F-117 was not as maneuverable as most fighters, and Zelko could only watch and press on as the enemy tried to find him.

Seeing the enemy fire as it approached his aircraft, he closed his eyes as the brightness of the explosions temporarily blinded him and threw deadly shards of jagged steel into his airplane. The aircraft began to pitch and roll violently.

There were witnesses. Capt. Mark Baroni was the aircraft commander of Frank 36, a KC-135 that had just refueled several other aircraft. Baroni was looking toward Belgrade when he recalled that "all of a sudden, I saw a series of airborne explosions and then one really big one."

Zelko's aircraft, a legendary stealth fighter, was hit. Realizing that his aircraft was dying, he reached down and pulled the ejection handles. The canopy separated from the aircraft and the ejection seat fired, propelling him into the frigid night air.

## **Moonlight Ride**

"My mom is not going to be happy with me," Zelko thought as he fell through the darkness. His parachute and life support equipment deployed. He quickly checked his chute, noting with some shock that the white and orange panels were clearly visible in the moonlight. Well-lit Belgrade was off to his right, and he sensed that enemy forces below would be alerted to capture him.

The propaganda value of shooting down and capturing an F-117 pilot would be enormous. The stealth fighter had until then seemed invincible. Zelko was determined to deny the enemy the second half of the prize—himself. It was about 8:45 p.m. local time. He was in for a long night.

Zelko took out his survival radio. “Mayday, mayday, mayday, Vega 31,” he broadcast on the emergency “Guard” frequency.

The crew of Frank 36 heard the call, as did a NATO E-3 AWACS aircraft in an orbit not far away. Flight Lt. Frank Graham, a British officer onboard the AWACS, returned the call, “Vega 31, ... Magic 86 on Guard.” Zelko was not at that moment able to respond.

Graham and the other AWACS crew members began frantically to react. Digging through reams of data, they had to quickly determine who Vega 31 was and what he had been tasked to do.

At the same time, they were beginning to get calls from several other agencies as the word of Vega 31’s troubles quickly spread.

Zelko made another radio call. “Roger, roger, out of the aircraft.” He paused and then continued, “Vega 31 is out, beacon on now,” as he switched his radio to transmit the emergency signal.

Knowing that the Serbs were probably monitoring the frequency, he stopped the beeper after three seconds, but it was critical that Zelko get a signal out quickly. Time was of the essence, and he knew that coalition rescue forces would respond.

The crew in Frank 36 acknowledged his call. Zelko put away his radio and oriented on the terrain. Still descending toward the Earth, he was only about 20 miles west of Belgrade.

At about 3,000 feet above ground, he passed through a cloud deck. The wind was from the southwest and he could see that he was drifting down south of the town of Ruma in an area of open farm fields. There were many vehicles on the roads and he was concerned that somebody would spot his parachute.

Zelko picked his landing spot and turned his canopy toward a plowed field about 50 yards west of a north-south rail line and a road with a “T” intersection.

### **In Enemy Territory**

Zelko landed, quickly hid his parachute, harness, and life raft, and scanned

the road. Seeing no activity, he moved to a hiding site he had noticed just before he landed. It was about 250 yards away.

There, he grabbed some of the rich Serbian dirt and smeared it all over his face, neck, and hands.

Fortunately, Zelko had worn several layers of clothes, and he had some extra insulation. Tucked inside his T-shirt, right over his heart, was a folded American flag. It belonged to the young airman who had prepared his target folder for this mission.

As he settled into his hiding site, Zelko anticipated that rescue forces were marshaling. The United States did not send its warriors into harm’s way without providing the capability to rescue them.

In preparation for combat, Zelko maintained excellent physical condition and had spent long hours reviewing the rescue procedures as directed by the special instructions (SPINs) in the daily tasking orders for the aircrews. He had received combat crew survival and evasion training and worked with specialists in his unit to develop a workable escape plan of action for just such an occurrence.

Zelko assumed that enemy forces knew of his arrival and also were actively organizing a search operation. Instinctively, he knew that his actions would be critical to the success or failure of any rescue attempt.

The downed pilot was equipped with several items to help facilitate his rescue. Besides his radio, he had Global Positioning System location equipment, several signaling devices, and a 9 mm pistol.

Rescue forces were in the region. Before the start of the conflict, three special operations squadrons deployed to an airfield near Brindisi, Italy. They were joined there by pararescue jumpers (PJs) from the 720th Special Tactics Group.

All were attached to Joint Special Operations Task Force 2. Their helicopters could be called on to perform combat recoveries under the tactical control of the Combined Air Operations Center at Vicenza, in northern Italy.

The CAOC worked for Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, the 16th Air Force commander and combined force air commander for this operation. Short had made combat search and rescue a high priority.

Brindisi was almost 250 miles from Belgrade. To reduce reaction time, several of the helicopters had been

ordered to Tuzla, Croatia, and were on alert there.

The task force launched just before Zelko took off. It consisted of a lead MH-53M piloted by Capt. James L. Cardoso and Capt. John C. Glass, an MH-53J flown by Capt. Shawn Cameron and Capt. Mark Daley, and the MH-60G of Capt. Chad P. Franks and Capt. Matt Glover. (See “Silver Stars,” June 2000, p. 80.)

Lt. Col. Stephan J. Laushine, commander of the 55th SOS, flew in the lead aircraft as rescue mission commander.

Arriving at Tuzla, the alert aircraft proceeded to the hot refueling area while Laushine went into operations for an initial orientation. The operations center was soon notified that the F-117 was down.

Their immediate concern was Zelko’s location. Information coming in from several sources initially indicated that Vega 31 was down northwest of Novi Sad, along the aircraft’s planned egress route. Based on that analysis, Laushine built a plan. The three helicopters would take off as a flight. Each would have a full complement of Air Force PJs and would be augmented with Army Special Forces.

As the rescue teams were getting ready to go, CNN showed scenes of the still-burning F-117 wreckage, footage being supplied by Serbian news services. The imagery sent a chill through the operations center at Tuzla.

Hunkered down in his hiding site near Ruma, Lt. Col. Dale Zelko waited.

### **The Search and Rescue**

CSAR doctrine calls for the formation of a task force composed of helicopters and A-10 attack aircraft. The escort aircraft would provide command and control and close-in air support for the helicopters.

For this operation, the A-10s from the 81st Fighter Squadron, Spangdahlem AB, Germany, had been deployed to Aviano. That evening, two A-10s were on rescue alert: Sandy 30, piloted by Capt. John A. Cherrey, and Sandy 31, piloted by Capt. John O’Brien.

Also orbiting—well to the south and at a safe altitude—was an EC-130E Commando Solo command and control aircraft. It had also monitored Vega 31’s radio calls.

One of the team members, Capt. Ripley Woodard, an A-10 pilot from Spangdahlem, was monitoring intelligence reports. Strong enemy forces were in Zelko’s area, and they were beginning



**As darkness falls, one MH-53J Pave Low III helicopter refuels in air while another cruises alongside. Choppers of this type, deployed in Italy, were key parts of the rescue of Vega 31.**

to actively search for the F-117 pilot. Woodard knew that rescue forces had to move quickly.

Maj. Phil Haun, the A-10 weapons and tactics officer at Aviano, was in the operations center when it received the report that Zelko was down.

Another pilot delivered Zelko's vital isolated personnel report (ISOPREP) information. This data, known only by the downed pilot, would give the Sandys the ability to authenticate the survivor and avoid being drawn into a trap.

The A-10s then took off. Arriving over the survivor, Cherrey would become the critical on-scene commander.

Using the same coordinates given to Laushine, Haun also began working with the intelligence section at Aviano to develop a battle plan. He met with representatives from the F-16 squadrons also at Aviano and suggested targets for them to bomb.

Haun intended to launch two more A-10s half an hour after Cherrey departed. These would be Sandy 41 and Sandy 42 and would be available to escort the helicopters for the run in and egress.

Then, 30 minutes after them, he would take off with another A-10, to be Sandy 51, and Sandy 52, able to swap out with Sandy 30 and 31. This should allow for continuous contact with Zelko.

Haun also calculated a rendezvous place and time for the helicopters to join up with the A-10s and had that location passed to the command center at Tuzla.

Unfortunately, the rendezvous time passed to Laushine was indicated in

local time. Haun was doing all of his planning in Zulu time. In this theater of operations, local time was one hour ahead.

When Laushine got the message, he realized that his force would be late for the rendezvous and he scrambled his crews to proceed to the meeting point, which was near the Serbian border west of Novi Sad.

### **Coordinates and Contact**

Zelko could hear activity around him and stayed as still as possible. He took out his GPS and got a good readout of his position. He reported his position to the EC-130, using a special code directed by the SPINs.

Aboard the EC-130, the young sergeant who received the message from Vega 31 wrote it down and handed the message to Woodard, who knew immediately what it meant.

"He just gave us his position," Woodard said. "Plot it in the map." The sergeant did so. It showed that Zelko was down a few miles southeast of the town of Ruma, not northwest of Novi Sad. He was 30 miles closer to Belgrade than initially thought.

After more than an hour flying, Cherrey and his wingman entered Serbia northwest of Novi Sad. They tried to make radio contact with Laushine and his helicopters, but were unsuccessful. Unknown to Cherrey at the time, he and the helicopters had been given different sets of CSAR frequencies. It took a few minutes to sort that out.

Cherrey proceeded into the rescue area, made voice contact with Zelko, and authenticated him using the ISOPREP data. Then Cherrey received a call from

the AWACS, with an updated position passed by Zelko. He quickly plotted the new position on his map.

A-10 pilot Cherrey called helicopter rescue commander Laushine and gave him the survivor's updated location. To save fuel, Laushine had landed his force in a field.

The new coordinates voided the recovery plan. Laushine had to quickly develop a new one.

And there was now another problem. All aircraft were now low on fuel. Flight Lieutenant Graham, up in the AWACS, scrambled to find tankers for all of the aircraft in the task force. Various Sandys would alternate as on-scene commanders.

The helicopters lifted off and rendezvoused with an MC-130P. They refueled from the tanker as it cruised 700 feet above the ground just three miles out of Serbian airspace.

After he had received his fuel, Cherrey and his wingman returned to the general area of the downed airman and re-assumed the on-scene command role.

The helicopters were also now full of gas and had repositioned to a location west of Ruma along the Serbian border. The plan was for Sandy 41 and Sandy 42 to escort the helicopters as they proceeded in to the survivor at low altitude. As they approached, Sandy 30 and Sandy 31 would fly in over Zelko.

### **From Both Sides**

After receiving a report that the survivor had been captured, Cherrey called Zelko again to reauthenticate him. Zelko answered correctly and the rescue was on.

The Serbs were closing in on him. In fact, it was later determined that a Serbian force of 80 troops and police were combing the nearby fields and had already found Vega 31's ejection seat and some boot prints.

Sandy 30 was ready to execute. He instructed the helicopter crews to call him when they were two miles from the survivor. Then Cherrey would direct Zelko to use a signaling device so the pilots could see him. Everybody acknowledged the plan.

Then another problem arose. A low cloud deck formed in the valley the approaching aircraft would use. The rescue helicopters could fly through such weather, but the escort A-10s needed to maintain visual contact with the helicopters to provide them any protection. It would be a helicopter-only rescue.

Additionally, Cherrey could no lon-

ger see the ground to assess the threat. This was critical because committing the helicopters for a pickup was his call. He could not fly down below the clouds for a look because the clouds were just too low. Thinking quickly, he called the survivor. "Vega 31, is it OK to come in there?"

Zelko was not ready for that question and did not answer. He knew that the enemy was all around but did not know how close or with what weapons.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cherrey called again. "Vega 31, if you don't answer, we're going to have to not do this now and come back later."

"Let's go for it," Zelko said, quickly figuring that if he then needed to abort the rescue effort, he could do it with his authentication data.



AP photo/Yugoslav TV



AP photo/Yugoslav TV

in trail formation on each side. Everyone aboard the helicopters was using night vision goggles as they proceeded in at treetop level to avoid the Serbian radars, anti-aircraft guns, and searchlights, but there were other dangers. As Cardoso led the task force in, one of his crew members spotted power lines and screamed, "Wires! Wires! Wires! Climb! Climb!"

Instinctively, Cardoso yanked back on the controls and the formation cleared the danger. They then descended back down to treetop level and continued in toward Zelko.

As the helicopters crossed into Serbian airspace, a surface-to-air missile site activated and began searching for allied aircraft. An F-16CJ overhead

"Execute, execute," Cherrey said, and the helicopters committed to the rescue.

Then, Cherrey had to depart again because he was low on fuel. He quickly passed the on-scene command duty to Haun and his wingman, Capt. Joe Brosious, but Haun had a problem with his A-10.

His primary radio, UHF, could receive but not transmit. Haun had to call Brosious on a secondary radio and tell him what to broadcast on the primary. This was a critical step because the rescue helicopters, survivor, and Haun all needed to be able to instantaneously communicate during the pickup phase of the operation, and they had to do it on UHF. Brosious would have to be Haun's voice.

### Into Serbian Airspace

Cardoso, in his MH-53, led the way with the second MH-53 and the MH-60



AP photo by Srdjan Ilic

Top, video image of F-117 wreckage shown on Yugoslav television. Center, more TV footage showing the aircraft's identifiers. Above, members of the Serb media swarm around a section of the F-117's wing.



**An MH-60G *Pave Hawk* helicopter lands during a training exercise. In the Zelko rescue, a *Pave Hawk* picked up the pilot and was gone in 40 seconds.**

engaged it with a High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile.

Haun saw the missile streak down into the clouds. The site stopped radiating.

Below, the helicopters were rapidly approaching the survivor. The MH-60 would land and make the pickup, while the two MH-53s would orbit above and provide fire support.

The helicopter pilots called on the UHF radio that they were now two miles from the survivor. Zelko was ready. He was given the code word to turn on his signaling device. He complied.

Aware now that a rescue operation was going on, more Serbian missile sites in the area tried to track the intruding aircraft. The A-10 pilots received immediate threat indications on their radar warning receivers and employed their chaff dispensers, jamming pods, and maneuvered to evade the deadly missiles.

At the same time, the A-10 pilots were trying to maintain awareness of what was going on below them.

Cardoso announced that they were now overhead of the survivor's location—but he could not see Zelko's signaling device.

Zelko could hear the helicopters and tried to give them vectors. It did not help. He was becoming concerned and asked if the rescuers could see his signal.

Cardoso responded that they could not.

The moment was thick with tension as all realized that the opportunity was slipping away.

Zelko told the CSAR forces to stand by, informing them that he thought

his signaling device was inoperative. Time for a successful rescue was running out.

Orbiting now in the pitch black above Zelko's position, Cardoso could see vehicles moving along the roads. There was no time to waste. "Just give me any ... signal," he barked on the radio. Zelko lit one of his flares.

The flare lit up the whole area, and Cardoso immediately saw him.

"We are bingo, bingo, bingo. Kill the flare," he called on the radio. This caused some confusion. To the special operations forces, bingo means "we have the objective in sight."

However, to the fixed-wing pilots, bingo means "I only have enough gas to get back to base and must leave now."

It confused Zelko, too, but at least the rescue forces now had a visual on him.

So did everybody else in the vicinity.

Cardoso directed the MH-60 to land and make the recovery. Zelko was right in front of him, about half a mile away.

### **Disorientation**

The bright flash of the flare momentarily disoriented the MH-60 pilot, Franks. "It was like the sun coming up in my goggles," he said.

Zelko crushed the flare into the dirt with his boot. As he did, the MH-53s set up their protective orbit. Franks began

a very steep descent and then settled on the ground. Zelko was 100 feet away. The PJs, SSgt. Eric Giacchino and SrA. John M. Jordan, dismounted and moved toward the survivor, rifles at the ready. In the helicopter, the gunners scanned with their mini guns for any close-in enemy activity.

Zelko was kneeling down as he had been trained to do. He used his radio to ask for permission to come aboard the helicopter. Then he noticed the dark forms of the PJs and raised his hands in a submissive pose. The PJs immediately identified him.

"How ya doin', sir?" one said. "We are here to take you home."

The orbiting MH-53 crews could see Serbian vehicles about 50 yards away.

When the PJs and survivor were safely aboard, Glover radioed the news that they were lifting off, survivor onboard.

They had been on the ground for 40 seconds. The rescue itself had taken a little over six hours.

The helicopters and A-10s headed west out of Serbia. Aboard the MH-60, the crew members did everything they could to make Zelko comfortable. The PJs gave him a quick examination and some water and food.

The helicopters proceeded directly to Tuzla. There, Zelko was more thoroughly examined by a flight surgeon and cleared to return to Aviano by MC-130.

Zelko personally tried to thank every one of the troops aboard all three helicopters. He received a pleasant surprise when he encountered Glover. Several years prior, Zelko had served at the Air Force Academy. Glover had been one of his cadets.

The MC-130 landed at Aviano at sunrise. The A-10 pilots had landed by then and they and much of the base were out to greet Zelko. He tried to thank everyone.

"He was watery-eyed as he thanked ... us for saving him," said Brosious.

The wing commander, Brig. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf, asked Zelko if he was ready to get a little rest. "Yes, sir," Zelko replied, but there was one more thing that he needed to do first: He had to present the young airman who had prepared his target folder with her flag. ■

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*Darrel Whitcomb is a career aviator and freelance historical writer. He served three tours in Southeast Asia plus a short tour in Iraq and is the author of *The Rescue of Bat 21* and *Rescue in Desert Storm*. His last article for *Air Force Magazine* was "Farm Gate," in the December 2005 issue.*