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THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE RESCUE ATTEMPT

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHARLES S. THOMAS

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On 24 April 1980 the United States Military's attempt to rescue the fifty-three American hostages held in Tehran suffered ignominious defeat in the Iranian desert. A combination of some training defects, command and control problems, adverse weather conditions and bad luck caused early cancellation of the mission. Eight men died in the effort, and the hostages remained in captivity for a total of 444 days. It was a good idea -- American pride and honor had been badly injured and this was an opportunity to show the world Americans were capable of dealing with international terrorism in a carefully calculated and measured way. But flawed planning and execution spelled doom for the endeavor and made an already bad political situation even worse. This paper examines what led up to the raid, what was planned, what went wrong, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience.

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THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE RESCUE ATTEMPT

An Individual Essay

by

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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On 24 April 1980 the United States Military's attempt to rescue the fifty-three American hostages held in Tehran suffered ignominious defeat in the Iranian desert. A combination of some training defects, command and control problems, adverse weather conditions and bad luck caused early cancellation of the mission. Eight men died in the effort, and the hostages remained in captivity for a total of 444 days. It was a good idea -- American pride and honor had been badly injured and this was an opportunity to show the world Americans were capable of dealing with international terrorism in a carefully calculated and measured way. But flawed planning and execution spelled doom for the endeavor and made an already bad political situation even worse. This paper examines what led up to the raid, what was planned, what went wrong, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience.--

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The Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt

On 24 April 1980 the United States Military's attempt to rescue the fifty-three American hostages held in Tehran by followers of the truculent Ayatollah Khomeini suffered ignominious defeat in the Iranian desert, 265 miles from the objective. The complex, penta-service rescue scheme was never really put to the test. A combination of some training defects, command and control problems, adverse weather conditions and bad luck caused early cancellation of the mission. As a result, the hostages remained in captivity for a total of 444 days, the Carter administration retired in humiliation, and American national spirit fell to a post-Vietnam low. It was a good idea -- American pride and honor had been badly injured. This was an opportunity to show the world Americans were capable of dealing with international terrorism in a carefully calculated and measured way. But flawed planning and execution spelled doom for the endeavor and made an already bad political problem even worse. In this paper we will examine what led up to the raid, what was planned, what went wrong, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience.

The seeds of the crisis can be directly traced at least as

far back as 1978, when it became clear that the Moslem fundamentalist led revolution against the Shah Mohammed Peza Pahlavi government had split Iran badly. The Moslems were especially displeased with the brutality of SAVAK (national secret³ police organization) and with western materialism and moral values which the Shah had imported from the "American Satan", to use the term attributed to exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.¹

Events transpired quickly in 1979. The Shah fled to Egypt on 16 January, leaving Prime Minister Bakhtiar in charge of the seething cauldron. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from France on 1 February to the greeting of two million followers. The evacuation of Americans began immediately. Some forty-five thousand left for home. Most Foreign Service personnel were recalled, but 75 remained in the forlorn hope that meaningful diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran were still possible in the increasingly hostile anti-American atmosphere. Hardly a day passed without some manifestation of this increasingly strident Iranian sentiment. There were news broadcasts, demonstrations, speeches in Parliament and venomous pronunciations of American wrongdoings from the lips of the Ayatollah. Turmoil, lawlessness and increasing anti-United States sentiment prevailed in Iran. In February, an angry mob seized the American Embassy and temporarily held seventy

personnel. An Iranian employee was killed and two Marines were wounded before order was restored by the Tehran government. Ayatollah Khomeini continued to blame the United States (and the "great Satan", President Carter) for Iranian disunity. In May, a crowd of 150 thousand gathered at the United States Embassy chanting "death to Carter". Notwithstanding this and other seemingly overwhelming evidence that United States personnel were in jeopardy, the President still did not recall the remaining American Foreign Service personnel, so strong was his desire to preserve contact with the country which had been such a strong ally in this vital but politically unstable region of the world. During the time since the Shah's departure and Ayatollah Khomeini's return, the Carter administration had been working hard to engineer a rapprochement with the Tehran government.² They were not willing to give up yet.

One more clear indication of impending disaster, and thus an opportunity to avoid the crisis, was allowed to pass without action in October of 1979. The Shah was desperately ill, in fact dying of cancer, and was allowed to enter the United States for surgery and radiation treatment at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. American Embassy officials had predicted a violent reaction in Iran if the Shah was permitted to travel to the United States for any reason.³ Still, no recall of foreign service personnel or destruction of classified documents was

ordered. There were reasons for this failure. Premier Mehdi Bazargan guaranteed the safety of the United States Embassy and of Americans in Iran during the time of the Shah's visit. Furthermore, the Carter administration wished to show faith in the Bakhtiar government, again in hope that friendly relations with more moderate elements of the Iranian leadership could be maintained. Prime Minister Bakhtiar seemed sympathetic toward the United States, but faced endless pressure from Ayatollah Khomeini and his radical Moslem followers. Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State, said the United States Government should approach the situation "on the basis of friendship and mutual respect".⁴ The deleterious effect of this policy became painfully clear on 4 November 1979, when the American Embassy was seized and fifty-three American Diplomatic personnel were taken hostage. Two days later, at the direction of President Carter, planning for a military rescue operation began.

The plan was not simple.⁵ The force, described in detail later, their equipment and helicopter fuel were to be transported on six C130 aircraft from a secret base in Egypt to an island airbase off the coast of Oman, where the aircraft could refuel. They were to fly from there to a landing strip in the Iranian desert (code named Desert One) some 265 nautical miles from Tehran. There, they would link up with eight Sea Stallion (RH-53D) navy helicopters. The helicopters would have flown to

Desert One from the aircraft carrier Nimitz, on station in the Arabian Sea about 600 nautical miles away. Six was the absolute minimum number of operational helicopters required at Desert One. The other two were added to the mission to provide some insurance. Unfortunately, two extra helicopters would prove to be too few. The rescue force was to fly in the helicopters to a secluded hiding place called Desert Two, which was in the mountains approximately fifty miles from Tehran. The helicopters would reposition to another hiding place fifteen miles away. All elements of the rescue force were to be in place before dawn. That night the rescuers would be driven in trucks and vans to Tehran for an assault on the Embassy, scheduled to begin at 2300 hours local time.

Simultaneous with this major raid, a smaller force would depart Desert Two for an attack on the Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry to rescue the United States Charge' D'Affaires (Bruce Laingen) and two other American prisoners.⁶ At 2340 hours, everyone was to board helicopters at the American Embassy compound or, if that was not possible for any reason, at a nearby soccer stadium. C130 gunships would be overhead to suppress any resistance.

The helicopters were to fly everyone to a landing strip at Manzariyeh, thirty-five miles south of Tehran. The area was to

have been secured by a force of about eighty rangers airlifted from Qena, Egypt. C141 aircraft would land, load the forces, and complete the escape. The helicopters were to have been destroyed at Manzariyeh.

Since there was no existing organization with the special training, skilled personnel, and required equipment to take on the rescue mission, at least eleven groups of men were drawn together from army, navy, air force, Marine Corps, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sources.⁷ First, there were ninety-three commandoes from the army's Delta Force. Led by Colonel Charlie Beckwith, theirs was the mission to rescue the hostages from the American Embassy. They were a highly trained, cohesive unit of the very finest volunteer soldiers in the army. Second was a thirteen man ranger force from Europe who were to free Bruce Laingen and the other hostages held in the Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry. Third, twelve army anti-aircraft experts armed with Redeye missiles. Then there were eleven Farsi speaking linguists to drive the trucks and vans from Desert Two to Tehran and communicate with local inhabitants whenever necessary. They were drawn from military and civilian sources. One was a navy captain from the Naval War College. Fifth, the pilots and crew to fly the eight helicopters. All but three of the pilots were Marines. Although there was a training period of about five months, the pilots and commandoes would barely know each other by

mission time. They lived in different locations and in different conditions, and there was some animosity between these two vital elements of the mission. More about pilot selection later. Next was another group of twelve rangers whose task it was to guard the Desert One area while the C130 aircraft landed and the helicopters refueled. The seventh group consisted of air force special operations personnel who handled the refueling operation at Desert One. Eighth, the air force pilots and crews of the three troop transport and three tanker aircraft. There were CIA agents in Tehran who arranged for the trucks and vans. Tenth was another group of Rangers who would secure the landing strip near Manzariyeh. Finally, there were two Iranian general officers with no apparent mission who must have known someone in high levels of the United States government. If this collection of personnel was not complicated enough, the pilot selection process certainly was.

The first group of pilots came with the helicopters from the Atlantic Fleet. For security reasons, they were not briefed on the mission or the special skills required. This led, in turn, to the first of several problems directly related to a preoccupation with secrecy. Many of the pilots were not up to the technical task of night navigation by instruments across vast expanses of open desert while others were simply not excited about the mission. Some even broke security by telling their

wives. In any case, a more thorough search for pilots was undertaken and the final group consisted of 16 officers; 13 Marine, two navy, and one air force. Admiral Holloway, who headed the military review panel which reviewed the episode, called them "the best group of pilots in uniform". Others disagreed, saying Marines were chosen only to give that service a role in this highly prestigious operation. In any case, five weeks of valuable training was lost by the time the process concluded and all the pilots finally reported for duty.

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance opposed using the military option from the very beginning of the crisis. His view was that such an operation, in addition to risking the lives of the hostages, could bring Iran closer to the Soviet Union. Even if that did not occur, relations with our Persian Gulf allies would certainly be strained. And even if the raid was successful, the Shi'ite Moslem fundamentalists would enjoy increased popular support in Iran. That event would be counter to every State Department initiative to gain release of the hostages and salvage some diplomatic liaison with Iran. Mr. Vance was left out of the critical National Security Council Meeting of 11 April 1980, at which President Carter decided to proceed with the rescue attempt.⁸

The execution phase of the mission began well. The first

C130, piloted by Colonel James H. Kyle, landed on time at Desert One very early on that fateful 24 April morning. Colonel Kyle was the Desert One site commander in a complicated and not well understood command structure. On board were the secure radios, Farsi speaking interpreters, Colonel Beckwith, the first section of commandoes, and the site security force. No sooner had they landed and secured the site than a bus full of passengers drove up the road toward them. This was not a great surprise as the agents who had marked the landing field earlier warned of possible vehicle traffic in the area. The driver refused to stop until shots were fired over and under his bus. Once halted, the forty-five terrified passengers cooperated fully. The decision was made to evacuate them on one of the C130 aircraft and return them to Iran after the mission. The events to follow would eliminate any need for evacuation.

Soon after the bus situation was resolved, a small fuel truck followed by a pickup truck approached the site. They also refused to stop and fire from the security force ignited the fuel. The driver jumped into the pickup and they drove off, leaving some concern that the mission might be compromised. Whether it was or not proved to be an academic question. Other events would quickly become more critical. The fire from the truck was, however, much more than academic. The bright light was blinding to the pilots of inbound C130 aircraft. The light

of the fire caused the pilot's night vision devices to fog and that created some exciting moments as they landed on the rough desert strip. While the planes were able to land safely, they ended up more dispersed than planned, exacerbating the already difficult communication problem.

All C130s landed on schedule and four remained at Desert One, as planned. Three of them carried fuel pods to refuel the helicopters. The fourth was to carry security forces back to Egypt. They left their engines running to guard against restart problems. The choking dust, roaring engine noise and dark combined to make a very difficult command and control situation under the best of circumstances. And this command and control situation was far from the "best of circumstances". The plan called for four "commanders" on the ground.⁹ First was Colonel Kyle, the Desert One Site Commander. There was Colonel Beckwith, Rescue Force Commander. Third, was an army major, who was the Refueling Site Security Force Commander. Fourth, still enroute to Desert One, was Marine Lieutenant Colonel Seiffert, the Helicopter Force Commander. None of the commanders wore any distinctive marking. Since there had been virtually no joint training, there was uncertainty as to who was in charge. The age old mandate for unity of command was not firmly established. It might have all worked out if no unexpected events occurred. But the task force was not to be that lucky. There had been no full

scale dress rehearsal. There was no written plan covering the entire operation and explaining how the pieces fit together. While communication between Desert One and the White House was easy, there was no communication between the Desert One and the helicopter pilots (who were not permitted radio transmissions) or even from the aircraft on the ground to the site security force. Time moved on. The helicopters were late. Nerves were on edge.

Meanwhile, the eight RH-53D Sea Stallions departed on time from the aircraft carrier Nimitz for their 600 mile flight. Between one and two hours into the flight the first incident hit. A warning light in one of the helicopters indicated a nitrogen leak from, and thus possibly a crack in, a main rotor blade. This problem had occurred in training and Sikorsky Corporation representatives had conducted experiments which indicated the blades had at least fifteen hours of time left when the light went on. Moreover, of the forty-three blades returned for inspection, none were actually cracked. However, the pilots were not fully briefed on the possibilities and the pilot of the endangered helicopter decided to land. It is difficult to blame the pilot in this episode. He was trained to believe that when a trouble light went on there was a serious problem. Another helicopter joined him on the ground, picked up the crew and all classified documents, and flew on toward Desert One.

About three hours into the mission, the flight of helicopters encountered a large dust cloud. The pilots had expected clear weather, although the CIA produced Intelligence Summary mentioned the possibility of low level dust clouds. This fact had not been shared with the helicopter pilots and they had not trained or planned contingencies for an encounter with thick dust.¹⁰ Thinking the dust storm might blow over, the mission leader (Lieutenant Colonel Seiffert) landed his helicopter, fully expecting all six of his fellow pilots to follow. Only one landed with him. After a few minutes he realized he had a problem and took off in pursuit of those he was tasked to lead. No sooner had the helicopters cleared the first dust cloud than they encountered a second, even larger one. Then an alarm flashed in one of the remaining seven helicopters. A malfunction caused instrument problems and the pilot determined he had to return to the carrier. Whether or not there was a real danger requiring him to return is a topic for debate. If some communication had been allowed among the helicopters, the flight leader could have become involved. But such communication was strictly forbidden for security reasons. In any case, only six helicopters were left, exactly the minimum essential number required to depart Desert One.

These six Sea Stallions landed at Desert One between an hour and eighty-five minutes late. Sadly, one of the six had

experienced a failure in a hydraulic pump. The pilot had struggled forward in hope that it could be repaired at the site. But it could not. Only five operational helicopters were available and the mission had to be cancelled.

Now confusion reigned supreme. Two false reports of mission cancellation had already been circulated. That uncertainty, combined with the confusion caused by the dark, the dust, the deafening noise of C130 and RH-53D engines, and the fuzzy command structure, led to near chaotic conditions. Then disaster struck. One of the helicopter pilots, after refueling, maneuvered his Sea Stallion too close to a C130. His main rotor blade hit the left side of the aircraft's flight deck. Inside the C130 were the partially full fuel bladders, the demolitions to be used to blow a hole in the embassy wall, the anti-aircraft personnel with their Redeye missiles, and some of the commandoes. Both helicopter and C130 aircraft burst into flames. The calm, professional action of the crew chief allowed the passengers to escape from the aircraft, but the crew in the cockpit were lost. In all, eight died.

The remaining members of the task force boarded the three C130 aircraft and departed. Left behind were five helicopters, communications gear, weapons, maps, and important secret documents. Nothing was destroyed -- the site commander

determined it was too risky at this stage of the game. The only capability to destroy the equipment was with thermite grenades carried by a Delta Force soldier. In the confusion of loading the force on the C130s, no one knew exactly where this key soldier was. An alternate plan for the air force to bomb the site was called off so as not to endanger the forty-five passengers of the bus captured earlier. Thus ended the valiant but unsuccessful rescue effort.

It is customary for such a military debacle to be thoroughly investigated by a board convened under the provisions of, and empowered by, military law. Such action was not taken in this case. Instead, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones, appointed a "review group" to identify what went wrong, why it went wrong, and "lessons learned".¹¹ They were specifically instructed not to attempt to fix blame or recommend punitive action. The panel was headed by retired Admiral James L. Holloway III, former Chief of Naval Operations. He and the other five general officers who made up the panel wrote what came to be known as the "Holloway Report". It is important to note that all board members were extremely well qualified to do the job. All were generals/flag officers in the army, navy, air force, or Marine Corps and all had experience in some aspect of special operations. Four were retired, two still on active duty. None had participated in the planning or

execution of the fateful raid. A summary of some of their most important findings follows.

First, as has already been alluded to, there was an identifiable and serious organization problem. The chain of command from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the Joint Chiefs of Staff is clear. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs appointed Major General James B. Vaught to be the Task Force Commander. General Vaught decided not to use the established and readily available Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Contingency Plan and Crisis Action System (CAS) for operations in Iran. Instead, he built an untried organization with a new command and control system. Although there was not a plan which could have been used directly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Crisis Action System was composed of people familiar with the region and with current capabilities and limitations of the services. However, there was a preoccupation (bordering on obsession) with operations security which originated with officials at least as high as Secretary of Defense Zbigniew Brzezinski.¹² In deference to the security consideration, Major General Vaught decided not to use the JCS Crisis Action System but, instead, to operate in an improvised, highly compartmentalized manner. Very few knew how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Unity of command and cohesiveness were degraded in the interest of insuring there would be no compromise of the operation. The panel concluded that there was simply too

much emphasis on security and, as a result, sound organization planning and preparation suffered. The lesson learned is clear and inescapable. While security is important, even essential, it cannot be the overriding factor if in the end sound planning and organization are degraded.

The second major error was the lack of an overall joint training manager. The training sites for the separate, compartmentalized elements of the mission were spread throughout the United States. Training was conducted and monitored, more or less, by remote control. General Vaught directed all activities from his Pentagon office. He personally assumed the task of reviewing training schedules, providing operational support to the training sites and arranging for personnel and administration support. In some cases General Vaught was able to visit training. But more often he relied upon critiques forwarded to him in Washington. The distant, dispersed training sites and lack of a single point of contact below "the boss" caused frustration in the field and allowed major shortcomings, such as inadequate communications capability within the task force, to go unnoticed.

A third shortcoming noted by the panel was General Vaught's decision not to have a full dress rehearsal. The decision to forego such an operation was made to preserve security. There

was fear that a large training exercise might either be observed by Soviet satellites or lead to information leaks from participants. Another factor mitigating against a full rehearsal was lack of time. The training schedules were packed and the White House called and cancelled no less than seven full scale alerts, causing tremendous turbulence.¹³ Each alert caused the task force to scramble and prepare to execute the raid. The time lost preparing for deployment and recovering caused other planned training to be canceled. In any case, a full scale rehearsal would have been most beneficial.

A fourth area drawing criticism was the absence of an adequate plan for destroying equipment and classified documents. The only plan was to ignite thermite grenades in the aircraft if destruction was necessary. That plan failed miserably when the chips were down. Some feared that installing makeshift destruction devices on the helicopters would have been prohibitively dangerous. The Holloway panel pointed out that properly installed destruction devices are as safe as onboard fuel. And there was precedence for their use. For example, the helicopters which conducted the raid into the Son Tay prison camp in North Vietnam were so equipped. The failure to destroy equipment and documents left behind gave the Khomeini regime valuable information about western agents in Iran and a detailed description of the "Satanic" Carter government plan. The panel's

most scathing criticism of the operation centered on this delinquency.

Another area deserves discussion. One reason why a more detailed and capable radio communications plan was not developed was the fear that transmissions would be monitored by the Iranians. In fact, the Iranian capability to intercept radio messages was not extensively evaluated. We just did not know if their equipment could monitor ours -- and didn't try to find out. Allowing some inter-helicopter communications would have alleviated several problems and might well have resulted in six operational helicopters arriving at Desert One. Furthermore, better communications among the forces on the ground at Desert One might have prevented the cataclysmic finale. Clearly, this was a most important issue. In the future, an exhaustive evaluation of enemy capability should be undertaken before total radio silence is mandated.

The Holloway panel gave two major recommendations.¹⁴ First, the Defense Department should establish a counter-terrorist task force with a permanently assigned staff and certain assigned forces. It should be a field agency of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Their mission would be to provide the President with many options, ranging from a small group of specialists to a larger joint force. Second, the panel

recommended establishment of an advisory panel of active or retired senior officers with special operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff or Major Command experience. They would review plans and provide an objective, independent view in times of crisis. The recommendations have not gone unheeded. The Department of Defense reorganization now in motion will provide the special operations capability and the advisory panel has been established.

There is evidence we have learned some valuable lessons which make our potential for clandestine operations much more formidable. The Grenada operation, while far from perfect, was a vast improvement of anything that preceded it. The new Special Operations command will provide an organization with awesome capabilities and an effective chain of command. There will certainly be opportunities in the future to test effectiveness. To counter terrorism we will need a joint force, trained in unconventional warfare, highly mobile, and well led. There must be a national command system directing them. We are making progress and must continue aggressively if we are to ensure the "desert debacle" of the Iranian hostage rescue attempt is not repeated.

Lessons learned notwithstanding, "second guessing" or "Monday morning quarterbacking" is a great American pastime and the author finds irresistible the urge to join in the fray.

American public opinion, as measured by all the popular polls, indicated at least frustration with the hostage situation. Many clamored for military action. After the raid, a June 1980 poll indicated only twenty-nine percent of the American people supported the action.¹⁵ The views of the hostages were mixed. Mr. Laingen noted it was unlikely that the attempt could have resulted in rescue without casualties. One unnamed hostage was quoted as "thanking God for the sandstorm". Others supported the raid. The one with whom I empathize is Colonel Charles W. Scott, army attache', who quoted Theodore Roosevelt:

"Far better it is to dare mighty things to win
glorious triumphs, even though checkered by
failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits
who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because
they live in the grey twilight that knows not victory
nor defeat."

To this I can only add a loud AMEN!

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission, p. 6.
2. James Phillips, "Iran, the United States and the Hostages: After 300 days," Background, 29 August 1980, p. 2.
3. Gaddis Smith, Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years, p. 195.
4. Ryan, p. 9.
5. Ibid., p. 1.
6. Charlie A. Beckwith and Donald Knox, Delta Force, p. 254.
7. Arthur T. Hadley, The Straw Giant, pp. 3-4.
8. Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices, p. 409.
9. Hadley, p. 18.
10. Gary Sick, All Fall Down, p. 301.
11. Ryan, p. 113.
12. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Failed Mission," New York Times Magazine, p. 31.
13. Hamilton Jordan, Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency, p. 279.
14. Ryan, p. 123.
15. Ryan, pp. 126-127.

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