Desert One and Its Disorders

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Notes

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Charles G. Cogan[1]

Abstract

Desert One—largely a Special Forces operation—ended in abject failure and cost Jimmy Carter a second term as president. It was not only an organizational failure, due to a splintering of the U.S. armed forces, but a failure of political will and political appreciation. The U.S., confronted virtually for the first time with the new hostile force of Islamic fundamentalism, in the form of a devilish "soft war" scenario put together by Imam Khomeini and his lieutenants, reacted tentatively and with a certain propitiation. When five months later a hostage rescue operation was finally mounted, it was so conceived that the U.S. could call it off at any step along the way. Desert One turned out to be the defining moment that led to a sea-change in American military policy in the 1980s: the spread of the principle of joint operations for the U.S. armed forces (Goldwater-Nichols Act), and the companion Cohen-Nunn Act consolidating Special Forces under a U.S. Special Operations Command.

I would like to examine the role of United States Special Forces, in particular as seen through the Desert One operation in April 1980 to rescue the American hostages held in the U.S. Embassy in Iran. This unsuccessful operation was the defining moment not only for

1. The author was the chief of the Near East and South Asia Division in the Directorate of Operations of the Central Intelligence Agency between mid-1979 and mid-1984. What follows is a version of the presentation the author made to a conference on "Special Forces" held 11–12 June 2001 in Paris, under the joint sponsorship of the *Centre d'Études d'Histoire de la Défense* and the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.*

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U.S. Special Forces, but also for the American military as a whole. After Desert One, nothing was as it had been before, and the role of Special Forces was changed completely.

In the aftermath of the failed rescue mission, the Carter administration named a commission of inquiry headed by Admiral James L. Holloway. The commission's report recommended the creation of a task force for counter-terrorism, as well as an expert group on special operations.[2] There followed, in 1983, a partial consolidation with the creation of a Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and finally, in 1987, all Special Forces were put together under a single command at Tampa, Florida, called the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

But before analyzing this unfortunate operation, I would like to describe briefly Special Forces or, to use the precise term, Special Operations Forces (SOF).

Special Forces

The Special Forces' mission is to conduct unconventional operations. The other elements of the American armed forces, who engage in conventional wars, are known officially as General Purpose Forces.

From the beginning, that is, during the Second World War, Special Forces have been characterized by two main tendencies.[3] The first is what I would call the commando approach, utilizing elite assault troops. The example is the Rangers, heirs of the tradition of the British commandos, with whom the Army Rangers had their first experience of combat in World War II. During this conflict, the "commando-type" troops on the American side comprised the following units:

- Six battalions of Rangers of the U.S. Army.
- Four battalions of Rangers belonging to the U.S. Marines.
- The lst Special Service Force, a combined American-Canadian unit.[4]

All these units were dissolved at the end of the Second World War.[5]

Second is the more clandestine approach, emphasizing infiltration and intelligence. The main example is the Special Forces of the U.S. Army, often called just Special Forces, who form the preponderant part

2. *Rescue Mission Report,* August 1980 (Washington: Pentagon Library), vi.

3. Interview of 25 April 2001 with Major General (Retired) David Baratto, former commander of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School.

4. Presentation by Colonel Paul Gaujac on 12 June 2001 at the same conference on "Special Forces" at which this paper was first given; interview on 6 June 2001 with Robert Mattingly, who was formerly an intelligence officer with Joint Task Force 1-79, which ran the Desert One operation.

5. Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 11; Mattingly interview.

of the Special Operations or SOF Community. Here the ancestor was the Operational Groups of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), whose mission during World War II was to train and fight with the guerrilla groups combating the Axis and which cooperated closely with the British paramilitary service, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The OSS was also dissolved after the war. The founding father and first commander of the U.S. Army's Special Forces, Colonel Aaron Bank, was an officer of the OSS during the Second World War. Today, the emblem of USSOCOM is the spearpoint of the OSS.[6]

(I would note in passing that the concept of "communities" is prevalent in the United States, as in the SOF Community, or the Intelligence Community, the latter grouping together all the agencies—a dozen in all—dealing with intelligence.)

Thus the SOF Community—the Special Operations Forces—is composed of the following elements:

Firstly, within the Army are 12,500 personnel on active duty, most of whom are at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They are broken down into the following units:

- The Special Forces properly speaking, otherwise known as the Green Berets.
- The Rangers.
- Special Operations Aviation.
- Special Support Units.
- Psychological Operations Unit, whose mission is to conduct propaganda operations in the theater of operations and to communicate with the civil population.
- Civil Affairs Unit, whose mission in general is to assist local authorities in establishing themselves in the zone of operations.

Secondly, within the Navy are 2,700 troops on active duty in the following units:

- The Sea-Air-Land Teams (Seals).
- The Special Boat Units, whose mission is to aid the Seals and others to infiltrate towards an objective.
- A unit which assists in infiltration through the use of mini-submarines.

Thirdly, within the Air Force are 5,800 personnel on active duty, who man the long-range H-53 helicopters and the C-130 transport aircraft.[7]

These figures do not include those within the reserves who also form a part of the Special Operations, or SOF Community, and several small

6. Mattingly interview.

7. These figures are as of 1998. Thomas K. Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action: the Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 9.

specialized units whose mission is principally counter-terrorism, in particular the Army's Delta Force and Seal Team Six of the Navy.

The Special Forces and their various predecessors dating from the Second World War have had a history of ups and downs: valued in time of war but generally unappreciated afterwards, and always remaining under the suspicious eye of officers from the conventional arms.

In the early years of the Vietnam War, Special Forces played a large role in the raids into North Vietnam and the purging of Vietcong guerrilla cadres. But as the war gradually became one of movement, involving large-scale units, the Special Forces were often either underused or not appropriately employed.

After the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, a sentiment of "never again" permeated the ranks of the officers in the conventional arms—which meant that there should be no more involvement in counter-guerrilla wars that become wars of attrition. Added to this was the repugnance of the American public towards the excesses of Vietnam in the context of methods of unconventional war. As a result, many of the Special Forces units were demobilized, and Special Forces budgets were deeply cut.

The Hostage Crisis

When the hostage crisis began at the American Embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979, that is, seven years after the virtually total withdrawal of American soldiers from Vietnam, the American military was still in the shock of defeat, and the Special Forces were at a low ebb. The Vietnam War, which saw the death of 58,000 Americans and several million Vietnamese, was being regarded more and more, retrospectively, as having been a useless war. Thus within the United States, the tendency to reject high casualties grew inexorably until the concept of a war of zero casualties emerged in the 1990s.

On the eve of the incident at Tehran, a passing out ceremony honored the newly created "Delta Force," a small unit of some 120 men trained as an all-purpose counter-terrorist arm. Delta Force had just completed an anti-terrorist exercise which qualified it for a certificate of operational readiness. It was immediately considered for a hostage rescue mission at Tehran, should this become necessary.

But Delta Force did not have the means either to get to Iran or to make a clandestine approach to the American Embassy. The United States had a glaring lack of a centralized command that could conduct a turn-key operation, having under its control all the necessary support elements—air transport, intelligence, logistics, and combat air support. The government had to improvise, calling on units from various services. All these disparate units of the operation never held an exercise as a whole.

At the moment of the taking of hostages at Tehran, the United States was at a loss as to how to react on the political-operational level. A precedent at Tehran had occurred, which, however, was deceptive. In February 1979, ten months earlier, a Iranian group of youths had seized the U.S. Embassy, but within several days the Iranian government intervened to evacuate the intruders. On 4 November 1979, a group of militants calling themselves the followers of the line of the Imam (Imam Khomeini) invaded the Embassy. At the beginning, Washington thought that this incident would be a remake of the February incident and logically assumed a similar dénouement. It is interesting to note that, well after the November 1979 seizure, the militants stated that they had not expected to spend more than several days at the Embassy.

However, after some time, nothing of the sort took place. The "students" camped at the Embassy, and the affair rapidly became an international incident. The "CNN effect," as it later came to be known, was making itself felt.

The key point, in contrast to February 1979, was that the secular government, the so-called moderates, was no longer in place. The struggle between the moderates and the fundamentalist extremists for the favor of the Imam was being won by the extremists. On the eve of the seizure of the Embassy, the government of the moderates was overthrown, apparently as a sign of protest against the meeting held on 3 November 1979 in Algiers between U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and the leaders of the Iran government: Mehdi Bazargan, the Prime Minister; Ibrahim Yazdi, the Foreign Minister, and Mustafa Ali Chamran, the Minister of Defense.

A fortnight earlier, the Shah, the former ruler of Iran who had been forced to leave his country in January 1979, had traveled to the United States for treatment of cancer. The arrival of the seriously ill Shah brought Iranian tempers to a boiling point. Very quickly, Washington's decision to let the Shah in the country was seen as a grave error, and later on the Shah was eased out, first to Panama and then to Egypt.

The new government in Tehran, if it could be called as such, was hard to come to grips with. The supreme authority, Imam Khomeini, was outside of Tehran in the holy city of Qom, inaccessible to foreigners. At the head of the government in Tehran were the elusive figures of Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, whose standing with the Imam was uncertain and changing.

During the first days in Washington, all sorts of solutions were considered, including a declaration of war, a naval blockade, and the mining of Iranian ports. A senior official in the Intelligence Community even proposed that elements of the 82nd Airborne Division be landed at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, with the announced mission of marching from the airport to the Embassy, recuperating the hostages, and then

marching back to the airport and departing. This was, of course, an impractical option given the density of the population of Tehran, a city of four million people, but it was indicative of the frustration in Washington at what later came to be called asymmetric warfare.

Moreover, Washington was confronted with the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism, a new and disturbing situation. In the space of several weeks in November 1979, the Mecca mosque was also attacked, followed, after the exhortations of Khomeini, by an attack on the American Embassy at Islamabad. Islamic fundamentalism seemed to have the effect of a tidal wave which could sweep away the American position in the Muslim world.

Down deep, the Americans had not absorbed either the import of the Islamic revolution in Iran or the depth of the anti-American feeling that prevailed in the country as a result of the reinstallation of the Shah on the throne in the 1950s and the repression of the dissidents in 1963, which had propelled Imam Khomeini into exile. The Americans were aware that they faced a religious zealot at the head of the Iranian state, but they continued to think—wrongly, I believe—that Iran had other political forces that counted for something, such as the moderates within the revolutionary government or a number of military officers who retained some influence.

According to Iranian affairs expert Gary Sick,

> [Secretary of State Cyrus R.] Vance, and most in the State Department, held that Iran's revolution was unique, and that there were good reasons therefor. The perception that the U.S. was behind the Shah explained why the regime was acting the way it was. To deal with the regime, one had to understand what had gone on before . . . A second point of view was represented by Brzezinski . . . with some people in the Pentagon, and others outside the Administration. They felt that to deal with the revolution, one had to stand up to them. Make them understand your motives. Don't relinquish national honor.[8]

The extreme manifestation of the point of view of the State Department was the notion that the United States should act in such a way that Khomeini would regard the liberation of the hostages as a personal triumph. President Jimmy Carter had some sympathy for this point of view. In January 1980 he proposed a plan in six points aimed at arriving at a peaceful solution; the second point contained the following soothing phrases:

8. Interview with Gary Sick, 19 December 1989. Cited in Charles G. Cogan, "Not to Offend: Observations on Iran, the Hostages, and the Hostage Rescue Mission—Ten Years Later," *Comparative Strategy* 9, no. 1 (1990): 420.

> The United States understands and sympathizes with the grievances felt by many Iranian citizens concerning the practices of the former regime. The United States is prepared to work out in advance firm understandings on a forum in which those grievances may subsequently be aired, so that the hostages could be released with the confidence that those grievances will be heard in an appropriate forum after the release has taken place.[9]

But as Peter Rodman has observed,

> Americans find it congenitally difficult to grasp the possibility that an adversary can be implacably hostile, uninterested in compromise, determined only to do America harm. The expression of bitter grievances against the United States rather tends to evoke sympathy, triggering a reflex to show understanding, on the assumption that the embittered must be, and can be, conciliated. . . . The alternative assumption—that an implacable enemy can only be fought—has implications that no democracy can relish.[10]

During the period that stretched from November 1979 until the failed operation of April 1980, Washington tried, through various channels, to encourage the moderates within the Iranian political landscape and at the same time to make approaches aimed at obtaining the release of the hostages through negotiation. All these efforts turned out to be fruitless. But the Carter administration's continued hopes for a peaceful resolution of the affair caused delays in the implementation of an operation to liberate the hostages by force. And the Carter administration waited until 7 April 1980 to break diplomatic relations with Iran.

Towards a Military Rescue Operation

Little by little, in spite of the hesitations of the President, the administration moved toward a decision in favor of a military rescue operation in Tehran. Without a declaration of war, without an open threat, the administration proceeded to put in motion a clandestine operation virtually at the other end of the world. Even after the fact, the principle of a clandestine operation to free the hostages was supported by the Holloway Commission: "The concept of a small clandestine operation was valid, and it fitted with the principles of national policy. It offered us the best possibility of bringing back the hostages alive and the least danger of starting a war with Iran."[11]

9. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 400. Cited in Cogan, "Not to Offend," 421–22.

10. Peter Rodman, "The Hostage Crisis: How Not to Negotiate," *Washington Quarterly,* Summer 1981, 10. Cited in Cogan, "Not to Offend," 422.

11. *Rescue Mission Report,* 2.

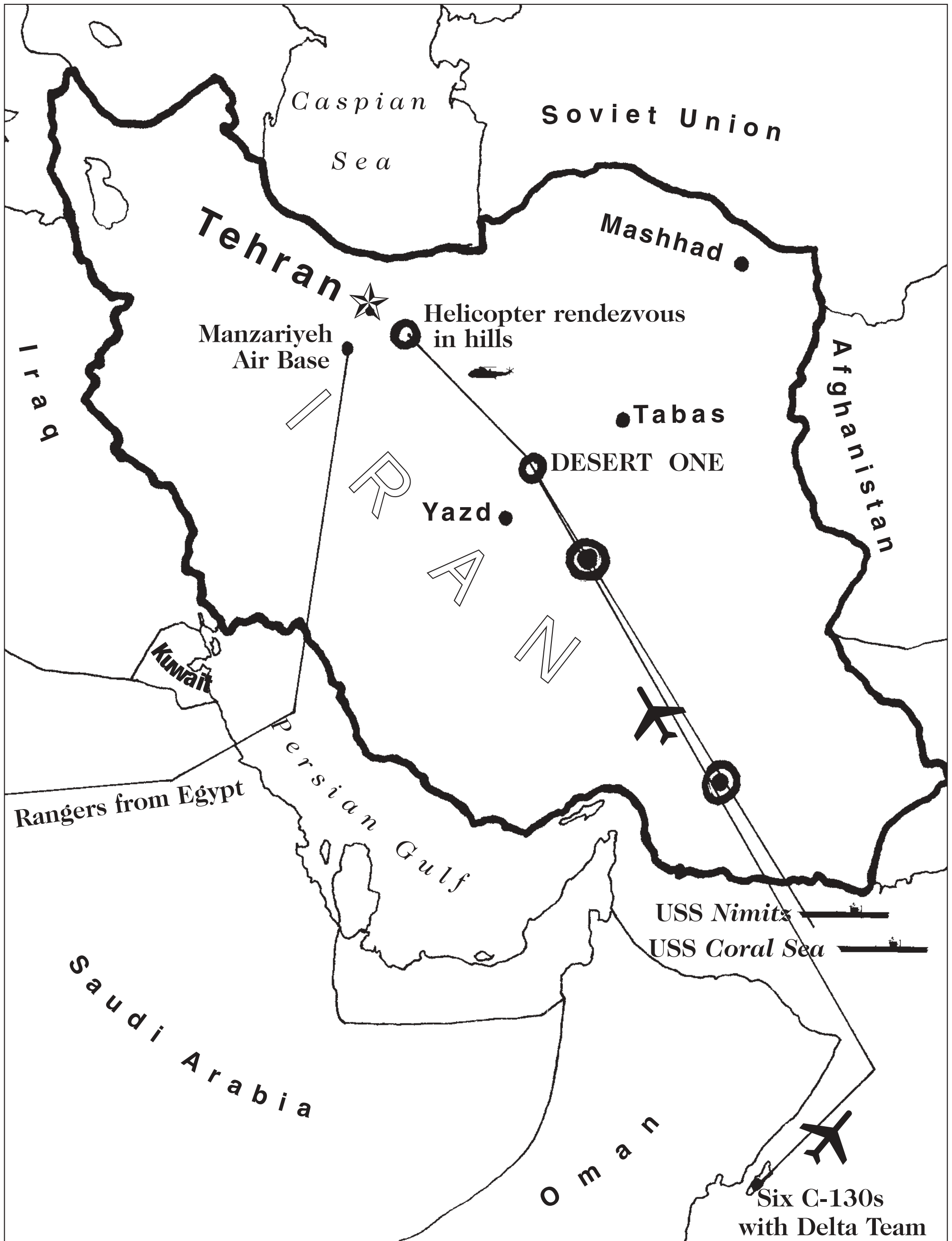
Because the challenge was so formidable, during the planning of the operation it was believed advisable—wrongly, I believe—to have a means of getting out of the operation at each stage in its unfolding. This viewpoint, very much that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, robbed the operation of what, it seems to me, was a vital element: confidence in a victorious result.

In his heart of hearts, President Carter did not want to do this operation, but after months of hesitation, he finally became convinced that a diplomatic solution was impossible. On 11 April 1980, the President announced to his immediate advisers that he had lost hope in such a solution. The Under Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, who was present in the absence of Secretary of State Vance, agreed with the President, without knowing the full extent of Vance's objections to the use of force in this case; and in fact, shortly after the failed rescue operation, Vance resigned from the Cabinet as a sign of protest.

Another factor that contributed to this sense of tentativeness was the distrust of the conventional forces officers towards non-conventional warfare and the personnel engaged in it. Added to this was another factor that tended to undermine smooth cooperation: this operation was not purely military, run solely by the military. Also participating was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), with all that implied in terms of tensions between civilians and military people.

But above all, to situate better the various hesitations, it was the complexity of the operation itself that rendered it so formidable. The observation after the fact by Defense Secretary Harold Brown that only the United States could have undertaken an operation of such complexity was not only a pitiful attempt at justification, but also an irrefutable affirmation. The operation did not involve merely one or two or even a half-dozen hostages; instead, fifty-three hostages had to be liberated. (There were sixty-six at the beginning, but early on the Iranians released thirteen hostages for "humanitarian" reasons. These were women and blacks). Besides, three of the hostages, including the chargé d'affaires, were not in the Embassy compound but were being held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where they had gone at the outset of the incident to try to negotiate an end to the takeover. And beyond that, six others had fled the Embassy and, unknown to the Iranians, had taken refuge in the Canadian Embassy. The presence of the three in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs complicated the rescue operation by requiring an additional helicopter in order to liberate them. On the other hand, the six at the Canadian Embassy did not figure in the calculations of the planners, and in the event they were exfiltrated surreptitiously shortly before Desert One.

The operation, as it was conceived, was both complicated and hybrid. Delta Force belonged to the Army. The transport aircraft, the EC-130 "Hercules," were from the Air Force. The helicopters, the RH-53D



12. This map was adapted from a sketch accompaning Otto Kreisher, "Desert One," *Air Force Magazine* 82 (January 1999): 7. (http://www.afa.org/magazine/0199desertone.html).

"Sea Stallions," belonged to the Navy. They were chosen because they had a considerable range, but they had to be piloted for the most part by Marines, because Navy pilots were not used to flying them long distances over land. The helicopters that the Marines used were the same but were a model (the CH-53) less advanced than the Navy's, and this would become one of the crucial factors in the failure of the operation.[13]

The helicopters were not capable of flying from the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* on the Arabian Sea all the way to Tehran. They had to be refueled at a small improvised airstrip six hundred miles from the *Nimitz,* but still far away from Tehran. This refueling had to be accomplished by C-130s taking off from Masirah Island, in Oman, some one thousand miles from this improvised airstrip. The C-130s also had to bring in the men of the Delta Force. The landing area chosen by the CIA as capable of supporting the weight of the C-130s, some of which had to bring in fuel bladders for the refueling, was called Desert One, which became the nickname for this ill-fated operation.

From Desert One, Delta Force would travel by helicopter to a hiding area some fifty miles southeast of Tehran. Then, after having left off the Delta Force, the helicopters would go to another nearby hiding area.

The CIA, which was responsible for the arrangements inside Iran, had the job of getting together the trucks and drivers who would bring Delta Force in the middle of night from the hiding area to the Embassy, located in the middle of Tehran. After Delta Force recuperated the hostages, under the aerial protection, if need be, of AC-130 gunships, the soldiers and hostages would be taken in the helicopters, which would have arrived in a nearby stadium, to an abandoned airstrip southwest of Tehran at Manzariyeh, which the Rangers would have occupied in the meantime. From there, everyone would be loaded into large C-141 transports for evacuation to Egypt, leaving the helicopters behind.

The operation, designated "Rice Bowl" in its preparatory phase, was run in Washington by a restricted group, Joint Task Force (JTF) 1-79, under the direct orders of General David C. Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For reasons of secrecy, the Joint Task Force (JTF) had to be created ad hoc; existing structures of the Pentagon could not be used. The chief of the JTF was General James Vaught, a veteran of the Rangers and of airborne units. At the moment the operation unfolded, Vaught was located at an advanced base at Wadi Qena, in Egypt. The in-place commander at Desert One was Colonel James H. Kyle, an Air Force officer who arrived there with the C-130s coming from Oman. The commander of the Delta Force at Desert One was Colonel Charlie Beckwith, a Special Forces veteran of the Vietnam War. The command of the heli-

13. Kreisher, "Desert One," 7.

copters at Desert One devolved to Lieutenant Colonel Edward Seiffert, a Marine officer.

The CIA had the mission of obtaining intelligence inside Iran, in particular on the situation of the hostages and the exact place of their detention. But shortly before the start of the operation, Special Forces sent one its former officers, Major Dick Meadows, accompanied by several Special Forces soldiers, into Tehran, in order to verify the information of the CIA. This was in part due to the lack of confidence between the military and the civilians of the CIA.

By chance, the cook at the Embassy, a Pakistani, had left Iran shortly before the operation was launched. He reported that all the hostages were located in the chancery building. (The Embassy compound included a number of buildings spread over several hectares.) This information, obtained by the CIA, was key. However, the military officers were not very impressed. Firstly, they had been disappointed by the failure of the CIA until that point to pinpoint the location of the hostages and the circumstances of their detention. Secondly, the officers running the operation were not aware of the source of the information, the CIA not being accustomed to divulging its sources.

The Unfolding of the Operation

Thus the operation, named "Eagle Claw" for its active phase, got underway on 24 April 1980. Forty-four aircraft were involved in the operation. Washington leaders were apprehensive about the problems that might be encountered at the Embassy, in particular the potential loss of life among the hostages or in the Delta Force. Problems with the helicopters were not anticipated, although Colonel Beckwith, the commander of the Delta Force, had asked that ten instead of eight helicopters be put at his disposal. The estimate was that six was the minimum number required to conduct the operation, but the Navy had informed him that eight was the maximum number that could be put in the hangar of the *Nimitz* without taking away other aircraft that were normally stationed there. However, the Holloway Commission later concluded that in a situation of non-war, which was the case, twelve helicopters could have been used, and that no factors, either operational or logistical, would have prevented the launching of eleven helicopters from the *Nimitz.*[14]

The United States had another aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean near the Persian Gulf: the *Coral Sea,* the principal ship in an Amphibious Ready Group, with a Marine unit (Battalion Landing Team) aboard. The presence of the *Coral Sea* was a key element in a deception opera-

14. *Rescue Mission Report,* 33.

tion aimed at providing a decoy to the Soviet fleet, which was surveilling U.S. naval movements in the region. One day before the launching of the rescue operation, the *Coral Sea* headed toward Pakistan at high speed. The Soviet fleet had no choice but to follow the more active of the two aircraft carriers, leaving the *Nimitz* free of surveillance.[15]

And so, on 24 April, eight helicopters took off from the deck of the *Nimitz* headed for Desert One. At a distance of two hundred miles out, a warning light in one of the helicopters indicated a problem with the pressurization in a rotor blade. For the Marine pilot, such an indicator meant that an imminent crash was possible and the helicopter should be landed; however, his helicopter was not the one (CH-53) to which he was accustomed, but the more advanced Navy model (RH-53D), which had never crashed after such an indication.[16] The Marine pilot did not know this, so he abandoned his helicopter in Iranian territory and with his crew got into another helicopter in the convoy. The number of helicopters was reduced to seven.

Next, the helicopter pilots were confronted with a severe dust storm—called a *haboob*—which was a rather frequent phenomenon in this part of Iran in the spring. Although the weather forecasters had signaled the possibility of *haboob*s in an annex to their bulletins, this phenomenon took the pilots by surprise. This lack of communications might be explained by the fact that, for reasons of security, the reports of the forecasters were not communicated directly to the pilots but had to be filtered through intelligence officers.[17] The Holloway Commission report stated that a weather reconnaissance flight of a C-130 just before the launching of the operation could have identified the *haboob* and determined the degree of gravity it presented.[18]

The commander of the helicopter flight, who alone had a special radio that permitted contact with the *Nimitz* with a minimum possibility of interception, informed the *Nimitz* of the *haboob* and recommended that the mission continue. The Task Force commander, General Vaught, gave his agreement. These communications could not be heard by the pilots in the other helicopters.[19]

The flight was very difficult for the pilots, who were navigating by sight and operating in radio silence for security reasons. They could not gain more altitude and get out of the *haboob* for fear of being intercepted by Iranian radars. One of the pilots, who became very disoriented because of a problem with his gyroscope,[20] decided to turn back, not

15. Mattingly interview.
16. *Rescue Mission Report,* 44. See also Kreisher, "Desert One," 7.
17. Ibid., 38.
18. Ibid., 40.
19. Ibid., 30.
20. Mattingly interview.

knowing that in twenty-five minutes he would have emerged from the *haboob*. Interviewed afterwards, the pilot declared that if he had known that he was rather close to getting out of the *haboob,* and that visibility was normal at Desert One, he would probably have continued his flight.[21]

The number of helicopters was now down to six, which was the minimum called for in the planning. The six helicopters made a delayed arrival at Desert One, and the follow-on phase was readied. But at the moment when Delta Force, having arrived in the C-130s, was preparing to embark on the helicopters, a fault in the secondary hydraulic system was discovered in one of them. There then emerged a difference of opinion. Some thought that the helicopter could still fly despite the defect in the secondary system. But others, in particular Colonel Edward Seiffert, who was in charge of the helicopters, thought that it was too dangerous and therefore the operation should be aborted.[22]

Colonels Beckwith and Kyle appeared to believe that the operation should be continued, and the former seemed to think that the helicopter pilots, traumatized by the experience of the *haboob,* did not want to go on. But at the same time, Colonel Beckwith did not want to reduce his force by some twenty shooters, which would have been necessary if the mission were reduced to five helicopters.[23]

Confronted with this impasse, Colonel Kyle could only recommend to his superior echelon that the mission be called off. Thus, even though Kyle was designated the overall commander at Desert One, in reality he did not command either the pilots of the helicopters or the chief of the Delta Force, both of whom, in effect, were in a position to exercise a veto. The only one who could have resolved this dispute in place was General Vaught, the commander of the Task Force, but he was far away, at Wadi Qena in Egypt. It seems to me that he should have been placed at Desert One.

The recommendation in favor of an abort was relayed by General Vaught to the White House and to General Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the leading hawk in the White House, recounted in his memoir: “Should I press the President to go ahead with only five helicopters? Here I was alone with the President. Perhaps I could convince him to abandon military prudence, to go in a daring single stroke for the big prize, to take the historic chance.”[24]

But Brzezinski thought the better of it and decided to recommend to the President to continue the operation with five helicopters, but only if Colonel Beckwith agreed. And having received a telephone confirmation

21. *Rescue Mission Report,* 45.

22. James H. Kyle, *The Guts to Try* (New York: Orion Books, 1990), 287–90.

23. Ibid.

24. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1983), 498.

from General Jones that Beckwith thought the operation was not feasible with only five helicopters, President Carter gave the order to call off the operation and withdraw the force from Iran. Brzezinski recalled the moment: "[The President] hung up . . . then put his head down on top of his desk, cradling it in his arms for approximately five seconds. I felt extraordinarily sad for him as well as for the country. Neither of us said anything."[25]

However, in the course of the evacuation of Desert One, one of the helicopters crashed into a C-130, an explosion took place, and eight military personnel were killed. The wounded were evacuated but the dead, as well as the helicopters, were left behind. The balance-sheet was a total failure.

The Aftermath

The unfortunate Jimmy Carter found himself quite alone following this spectacular failure. As I already noted, Cyrus Vance resigned in protest against the operation. Jimmy Carter courageously accepted total responsibility for the failed operation. The Congress, particularly the members of the intelligence oversight committees in the Senate and the House, who had not been informed beforehand, severely criticized the conduct of the operation. The Carter administration appointed a commission of inquiry chaired by Admiral Holloway and composed of three senior officers on active duty and three retired ones. The report of the commission criticized especially the lack of centralization in the planning of the operation and in particular the insufficient number of helicopters, which was the specific cause of the failure. The Holloway Commission also criticized the excessive secrecy employed by those who managed the operation, as this prevented a necessary exchange of information between military personnel belonging to the four different services: the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and the Marines. But from the point of view of the intelligence officers involved in the operation, secrecy was primordial. And it was kept perfectly, right to the end.

The Holloway Commission judged that the preparations for the operation were adequate, except for the lack of an exercise of the operation in its totality, which would have been helpful operationally. The problems of command and control would have surfaced and could have been corrected.[26]

The Holloway Commission also noted that, in not utilizing an existing task force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from the beginning, had to assemble a staff, select units, and train the force before an operational

25. Ibid.
26. *Rescue Mission Report,* 3.

capability had been attained. A task force already in existence, even with only a small staff and cadre units, would have provided an operational structure and a professional expertise around which a larger force could have been rapidly constituted.[27]

The Holloway Commission made two main recommendations:

> First, that a joint task force to counter terrorism be created under the direct orders of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
>
> Second, that there be established under the Joint Chiefs of Staff a restricted group of advisers on special operations, comprising senior officers both active and retired, and having a recognized competence in this area.[28]

One wonders what would have been the outcome of this operation if the number of helicopters assigned to it had been, for example, ten or twelve. I believe that the operation would have unfolded without a particular problem. The helicopters would have arrived at the hideout place, and everyone would have remained there during the daytime of 25 April until the night. They would then have proceeded by truck, in convoy, and with Iranian drivers, up to the Embassy. Surprise would likely have been total and the hostages recuperated without too much difficulty. Of course, there could have been some killed among the hostage-takers and even some among the Americans. The rescue of the three hostages at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would have been more difficult, I believe. Another imponderable would have been the reaction of the Iranians outside the Embassy compound. If they heard shots coming from that direction, would they have rushed en masse towards the compound? In that case there could have been a bloodbath, with the intervention of the AC-130 gunships hovering over the compound area. Such a situation would have had a very adverse effect on international public opinion. On the other hand, a successful operation, that is, the liberation of the hostages, would probably have brought forth less criticism than an embarrassing failure, which was the case. As the saying goes, victory has a thousand fathers; defeat is an orphan.

The opinion of an intelligence officer within JTF 1-79 is, then, not without foundation:

> Although it is easy to say in hindsight, the bottom line is that a daring commander in wartime could have and would have continued with five or even four helicopters. Beckwith was a fine Special Forces soldier, but his country was not at war, and his airlift had demonstrated a tendency to break before the first shot was fired. In the middle of the desert, far behind his envisioned time line, and doubtless already concerned about his transportation going into a hide site laager that had never been walked by friendly feet or seen up close

27. Ibid., vi.
28. Ibid., 3.

> by friendly eyes, he sought reassurance from a tired helicopter pilot and a frustrated airfield manager. And he didn't get it. Nor did Major General Vaught order the mission to go forward; and neither did the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense or the President.[29]

In the course of the summer of 1980, plans were started for another rescue operation. But this was never launched, because the Iranians, having drawn some lessons from Desert One, had proceeded for a time to disperse the hostages in different places of detention.

Finally, on 20 January 1981, at the precise hour of the inauguration of President Ronald W. Reagan, the Iranians released the hostages. This came at the end of protracted negotiations with Warren Christopher, conducted under the sponsorship of the Algerians. A number of people in the United States wondered whether it would have been best to have awaited this favorable dénouement instead of launching an operation as risky and as hybrid as "Eagle Claw." The hostages themselves, in particular, seemed to hold this opinion. In any event, one thing was certain: after the disaster of Desert One, the reelection of Jimmy Carter had become impossible.

The Reorganization

The legislation that followed in 1986, that is, the Goldwater-Nichols Act, accompanied by the Cohen-Nunn Act, changed everything. Goldwater-Nichols spelled the end of the large independence that the various branches of service (Army, Navy, Air Force) had enjoyed, and it also strengthened the role of the Chairman of the JCS. From then on, the emphasis was on joint operations. The Cohen-Nunn Act involved the reorganization and the consolidation of all the Special Forces, that is, the Special Forces of the Army, the Navy Seals and other Navy elements, and the Air Force's air commandos. All these units were regrouped under a sole command called the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and located in Tampa, Florida. The USSOCOM commander has under him all the Special Operations Forces in the United States and furnishes units to the commanders of the geographic commands. Once these units arrive in theater, they operate under the orders of the regional commanders (the CINCs), except in the case of certain sensitive operations which can be run from the United States. The USSOCOM commander for his part controls the doctrine, the training, and the budget for all Special Operations Forces.[30]

29. Mattingly interview.

30. N.B. Organizationally, the Marines are not considered part of Special Operations Forces.