



## ANALYSIS REPORT Operation Eagle Claw:

Prepared for Capt. Johnson  
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This report is a brief examination of the attempted hostage rescue in Iran in 1980, **Operation Eagle Claw**, with a focus on the role of probability in mission planning. It accompanies the slide presentation on the same topic.

### Overview

Many individuals, groups, and various types of equipment were involved in the attempted Iranian hostage rescue. Additionally, the plan required coordination of a complicated sequence of events, making it a complex endeavor that mandated detailed planning.

The ad hoc team formed for the mission had members from all 4 services, and 20 aircraft were involved:

- 4 MC-130s
- 3 EC-130s
- 3 AC-130s
- 2 C-141s
- 8 RH-53s

To execute the plan, the team was to be inserted into a staging area known as **Desert One** the night prior to the assault. Information was greatly compartmentalized, which hampered effective staff planning. Additionally, the operation was further hindered by the fact that the RH-53 aviators had not worked with the team before, and had on average only 15 hours of night vision goggle (NVG) training, though the effective use of NVGs were a critical component to the plan's success.

### Timing and Events

The basic plan for the hostage rescue relied on a sequence of coordinated activities of personnel and equipment. For our purposes, the following details are significant:

1. At Desert One, 3 **MC-130s** were to offload the Delta Force team, the USAF combat controllers, and logistical team.
2. The 3 **EC-130s** were to land and prepare to refuel the **RH-53** helicopters.
3. The **RH-53** helicopters would then load the Delta team and fly to the edge of Tehran. They would link up with in-country agents, who would lead them to a safe house near

the hostages in preparation for the assault the next night. The helicopters would hide in-country until they were needed for the exfiltration.

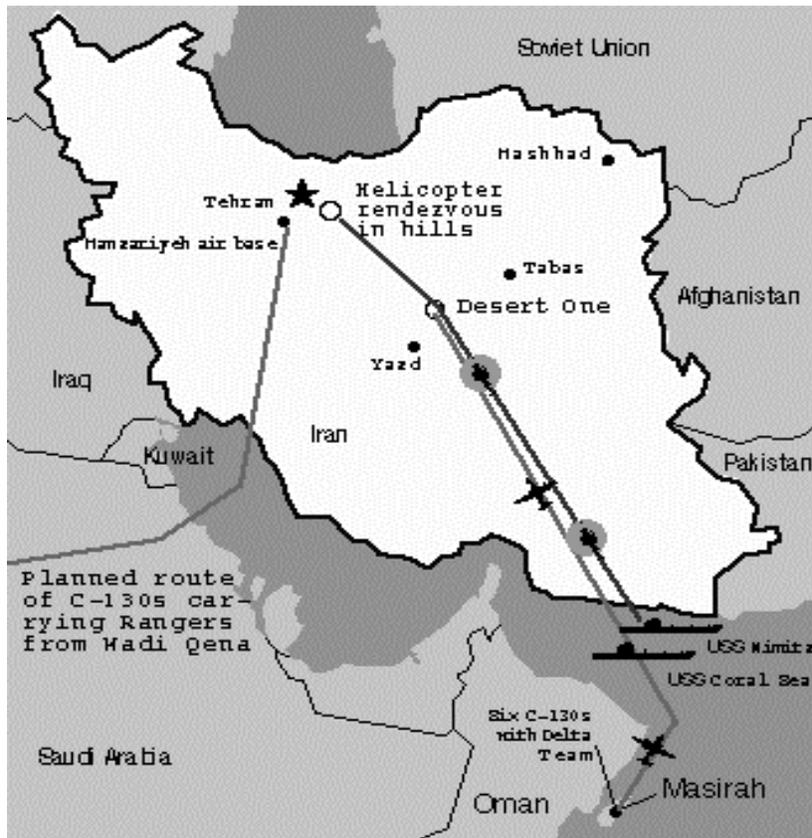
4. Each **RH-53** could carry 55 passengers. Between the hostages, the Delta team, and the in-country personnel, 6 helicopters were needed to evacuate all personnel after the rescue. Fewer helicopters meant someone would be left behind, or only a smaller assault force would be carried into Tehran.
5. The **AC-130s** were necessary to provide pinpoint gunnery support during the rescue mission.
6. The **C-141s** were also necessary to evacuate everyone from out of country.
7. The **C-141s** needed an airstrip at Manzariyeh, which was to be secured by C/1-75 Rangers. The helicopters were to ferry the team to Manzariyeh. Then the helicopters would be destroyed, and everyone would depart Iran.

### Planning Concerns

As with any military endeavor, Operation Eagle Claw's potential for success relied on projections made from sound probability analysis. The initial analysis led to a number of concerns about personnel and equipment.

- **Helicopter reliability:** For planning purposes, each helicopter was given a 75% chance of completing the operation without a failure requiring a mission abort.
- **Shortage of RH-53s:** Colonel Beckwith, the mission commander, had asked for 10 RH-53s. The Navy only provided 8, claiming that the carrier could only store 8 on the hangar deck.
- **Tensions Concerning Resource-Sharing:** At the time the operation was planned, RH-53s were employed performing the long-range anti-mine searches in the Persian Gulf. The Navy was reluctant to send most of its helicopters on a mission in which they were slated for destruction, thereby stripping the fleet of its anti-mine platform in a very active mine threat region.

The mission plan is illustrated in the following operations map.



### Implementation and Results

The helicopters began their flight. Information from a previous reconnaissance had indicated that there was not radar coverage of the route below 3,000 feet, but that information was not incorporated into the mission flight plan.

To avoid radar, the helicopter pilots were instructed to fly at or below 200 feet. Three factors in particular hampered the effectiveness of this faction of the plan's implementation:

- The aviators were flying using NVGs (with an average of only 15 hours of NVG training).
- The instruments in the cockpit were taped over to prevent the lights from interfering with the goggles.
- The pilots flying the helicopters were not from the squadron that owned the aircraft.

Though the C/1-75 Rangers captured their airstrip, much else in the plan went awry, in particular in terms of the RH-53s. The helicopters encountered a *haboob*, a desert dust storm. The pilots could see neither the ground nor each other, and they had no instruments. Two helicopters landed when they lost sight of the formation, though they later rejoined the rest at Desert One. Two pilots also aborted in reaction to warning lights triggered on their instrument panels. Squadron pilots know that those warning lights can be safely ignored, but the pilots on the mission did not. The force was down to 6 helicopters.

At Desert One, one of the 6 remaining helicopters had a primary hydraulics failure, leaving only 5 serviceable helicopters on the ground. The mission was aborted.

During the scramble to refuel and leave, one of the helicopters hit one of the EC-130s--the refueling planes. Chaos ensued. The order was given to blow the helicopters and aircraft and exfiltrate the country. That order was not executed--it was dark, and there were wounded and dying men to attend. Because of the failure to blow the aircraft, the plans fell into Iranian hands the next day. The in-country agents were compromised and almost lost.

There were 8 men killed on the mission. They were:

- MAJ Richard Bakke, USAF
- MAJ Harold Lewis, USAF
- MAJ Lyn McIntosh, USAF
- CPT Charles McMillan, USAF
- TSG Joel Mayo, USAF
- SSG Dewey Johnson, USMC
- SGT John Harvey, USMC
- CPL George Holmes, USMC

### **Aftermath and Perspectives**

Following the debacle, a commission headed by Admiral James Holloway, USN (retired), released a significant report that included three factors relevant to our focus:

- The rescue mission was a high-risk operation. People and equipment were called upon to perform at the upper limits of human capacity and capability. There was little margin to compensate for mistakes or just bad luck.
- Chances for success would have been improved if more backup helicopters had been provided, if a rehearsal of all mission components had been held, and if the helicopter pilots had better access to the data on the RH-53s BIM warning system.
- Two factors combined to directly cause the mission abort: (1) an unexpected helicopter failure rate, and (2) the low visibility flight conditions en route to Desert One.

Later, the senior Air Force officer, Colonel James Kyle, in his book on the mission, argued plausibly that there were never less than 7 operational helicopters, and all that was lacking for mission success was "the guts to try."

The helicopter commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Seiffert, defended the decision of his pilots to abort when their indicators showed mission critical failure.

Although all parties seemed to agree that had the team gotten to Tehran, the mission would have been successful, this hypothesis is doubtful. There was no redundancy in the C-141s, the MC-130s, or the 6 helicopters once they arrived in Tehran. There were many more chances for things to go wrong in just the aviation support, let alone the tactical part of the mission. Given the planning figures, there was a 33% chance that there would be less than 6 helicopters complete the mission, even before the dust storm was factored in.