



Maj. Jeff "Spanky" Peterson leans on an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter similar to the one he flew in a 2005 rescue mission in Afghanistan. Peterson was the main pilot in the rescue of Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell.

Air Force pilot pulled off edgy night rescue

By Blake Morlock - Tucson (Ariz.) Citizen
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Maj. Jeff "Spanky" Peterson called his wife to tell her that he was fine. He was out and about and not with Mike, he said.

The Air Force Reserve helicopter pilot, who lives in Tucson, was calling from a remote airfield in Afghanistan, and he was badly shaken.

Penny Peterson was shopping when she got the call and was nervous. She hadn't heard from him, but she had been hearing from other wives that her husband had been tasked to do something.

"Did you just do what you've been training 15 years to do?" she asked.

That almost sent Peterson over the edge. He had. He just couldn't talk about it for security reasons.

He had helped save the life of a Navy SEAL, and take part in the last chapter of the current New York Times best-seller "Lone Survivor."

Peterson, 40, is not mentioned by name in Marcus Luttrell's harrowing tale of the single largest loss of American life in Afghanistan. Yet the part he played is a story of courage when everything goes wrong.

It was late June 2005, and Peterson was safely stationed at the sprawling U.S. military base in Kandahar on a two-month deployment that was winding down. He'd be home by July 4 after doing some routine pickups. The primary role of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base's 305th Air Rescue Squadron seemed to no longer exist.

"Our mission is to go get Air Force pilots who get shot down in enemy territory," Peterson said. "But they don't get shot down anymore."

Much of the work being done in Operation Enduring Freedom was reserved for secret agents, elite Delta forces and Navy SEALs. To them, Peterson was "just Air Force," he said.

"We don't play with those guys," Peterson shrugged.

His number was about to be called.

A four-man SEAL team had been ambushed in the eastern Afghan mountains, and three had been killed in a rolling firefight.

The fourth, Luttrell, was wounded and suddenly found himself under the protection of a Pashtun tribal village.

A team of Navy SEALs was sent out to get Luttrell back, but the helicopter they rode in was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, killing 13 onboard.

All told, 16 were killed.

Peterson only knew a helicopter had been shot down when he was pulled into the life-and-death drama that was about to unfold. No, he would not be home July 4.

He and his flight leader, Lt. Col. Jeff Macrander, were ordered to fly their HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters to Bagram Airfield, in eastern Afghanistan, where they were told they would be looking for any survivors. Then they were sent to a small airstrip in Jalalabad, near the Pakistan border, to wait for orders to fly.

Radio transmissions picked up in the area suggested that an American had survived.

Peterson and Macrander flew on the night of June 30, and they heard "real faint" clicking on the radio. Someone, they believed, was in hiding but could not talk.

They flew in the dark with night-vision goggles because rescue missions during the day fly "low and slow, with our butts hanging out," Peterson said.

"We are frantically trying to get this guy to show himself," Peterson said. "But we are running out of gas."

They were forced to return to base when their fuel ran low.

The next night, they flew again, but there weren't even clicks. They found nothing.

That's when an Afghan tribal leader showed up at a Marine base in the region, with information confirming that he was protecting Luttrell in his mountain village.

Peterson's role initially was about to get a lot smaller, but then he'd be shoved front and center.

Commanders originally decided that Peterson and Macrander would fly in support of a mission to get Luttrell back. Their role would be to linger at the edge of the operation and pick up any of the rescuers who might need to be extracted from the fight. Then the brass changed its mind and decided to use the Special Forces helicopters elsewhere and let Peterson and Macrander pull Luttrell out.

Peterson assumed that it would be the same kind of operation they'd planned the last two nights. Macrander would fly in and grab Luttrell, while Peterson "was happy" to wait and provide his flight leader cover.

They were going in with two A-10 ground attack jets and an AC-130 gunship providing aerial support. On the ground, 20 special operations forces would be slugging it out with any Taliban who might cause trouble. Peterson would be an afterthought.

Not quite. Macrander decided to do it differently and perform a "Trailer-Spooky" maneuver, in which he would fly in and spot the landing site for Peterson, who was behind. Now Peterson started to feel the nerves.

"That's when you start thinking about the wife and kids and you realize this isn't training at Gila Bend or flying up to Phoenix," Peterson said.

They flew in that night in darkness through the canyons leading up the mountains. It was more than dark; it was pitch black. Clouds blocked the stars, so Peterson's night-vision goggles had no ambient light to amplify. His "Forward Looking Infrared" sensors, which pick up temperature changes, were on the fritz, and his infrared goggles weren't working properly either. So he was basically blind while flying inside a narrow canyon.

He had only Macrander's helicopter as a reference. It's all he could see.

When they found the landing site, the plan was to have the AC-130 shine an infrared beacon on it, but at 30 seconds out, he heard the call "negative burn." Water vapor blocks infrared waves, and the clouds that night were turning into a blindfold.

Suddenly, he saw too much. Airstrikes were "shwacking" the canyon to divert the Taliban's attention. An infrared lantern meant to mark the site was flashing, but so were the strobes on the helmets of all the Special Forces, marking their positions.

They were getting closer, but Peterson could not tell where to land. He just saw a bunch of flashbulbs going off inside a black soup.

An A-10 pilot then said he would fly in and try to light the site with his infrared, as if he were strafing but not pulling the trigger to fire the guns. Clouds again were foiling the plan and blocking the beam.

Peterson got closer, but he didn't have a place to land. At what he calls the last second, the beam from the A-10 found a break in the clouds and shined on the landing site "like a flashlight from God."

Great. Now the real fun started. The village was a series of terraces cut into the mountainside creating a small staircase — a real small staircase — on the slope. Peterson was expected to land on one of these terraces that were at most 100 feet between a cliff wall and a sheer drop, with huts scattered around. His rotor blades had a diameter of 57 feet.

This was more than what he had trained to do.

“I wouldn’t have tried this during the day,” Peterson said.

He was coming down, though, with scant room to maneuver. The rotor kicked up dust from the ground. Now Peterson was blinded inside a swirling brown vortex.

Peterson’s gunner and engineer could see the ground beneath him, but Peterson saw only brown. He started to drift toward the cliff wall that would shatter his rotor and bring his bird rolling down the mountain.

“Stop left!” he heard.

“Like a good pilot, I go hard right,” he said, but his co-pilot anticipated this natural reaction and held his hand out so the control stick couldn’t move too far to the right to send them over the cliff.

Then he saw something off in the distance with his NVGs that looked like a “hanging plant.” It gave him a fixed reference so he could descend.

“I’m committed now,” he said. “That’s when everything goes into slow motion.”

He dropped down and his wheels hit the ground. He looked out his window and saw that he was less than 2 feet from the cliff.

He turned to yell at his engineer who spotted that side.

"Sir," the engineer said. "You didn't need to know that."

They weren't on the ground long when the parajumpers, who flew in Peterson's helicopter, jumped out and grabbed Luttrell, lifting him onboard. Then they were off again, back to Jalalabad.

Peterson was fine most of the way back and then he landed and shut down the helicopter. Luttrell was transferred to a transport aircraft and flown off to a hospital.

"That's when it starts," he said. "I started shaking."

He smiles in the retelling because he was all nerves, but his parajumpers were on full adrenaline. "They're jumping around and banging the windows saying, 'You the man, Spanky!'"

But Spanky Peterson just wanted to do one thing: Call his wife.

Modern warfare availed Peterson use of a satellite phone to track Penny Peterson down. He couldn't tell her anything about what he'd just been through but "just wanted to hear her voice."

She pressed for information.

"Are you with Mike?" she asked. This was code. If he was with Mike, he was safe in Bagram.

"No," he said. "I'm out and about. Everything is good. Everything is real good."