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Rescue Operations in the Second Gulf War®

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Editorial Abstract: In keeping with the American way of war, when our combat forces deploy, they are accompanied by units dedicated solely to rescue operations. Even though we rarely called upon their services because of the relatively few losses incurred during Operation Iraqi Freedom, they nevertheless performed with the professionalism and élan that have become their historical standard.

The press called it “shock and awe.” Beginning on 19 March 2003, coalition military operations against the Baath regime in Iraq moved quickly and decisively, overwhelming the Iraqi military forces and deposing Saddam Hussein. As a matter of policy, the United States never deploys military forces anywhere in the world without providing a capability to rescue or recover personnel who may become isolated or captured in enemy territory. This mission, known as personnel recovery (PR), refers to the sum of all the efforts our nation will make with each of its instruments of power to recover our young men and women. This national imperative, which includes combat search and rescue (CSAR), has the backing of a strong rescue capability and a country willing to use it.

Among the US military services, the Air Force traditionally has maintained, both on active duty and in its Reserve components, the largest and most robust rescue force. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, three Air Force rescue task forces deployed to the theater. One task force—consisting of the 66th Rescue Squadron (RQS), flying the HH-60 helicopter; the 71st RQS, flying the HC-130 tanker aircraft; and the 38th RQS, providing pararescue jumpers (PJ)—deployed to locations in Jordan. These active duty units came from Nellis AFB, Nevada, and Moody AFB, Georgia. A second task force—consisting of the 301st RQS, flying HH-60s; the 39th RQS, flying HC-130s; and the 304th RQS, providing PJs—went to Kuwait. These Air Force Reserve units, called up under presidential directive, hailed from Patrick AFB, Florida, and Portland, Oregon. A third task force—consisting of the 129th RQS, flying HH-60s; the 130th RQS, flying HC-130s; and the 131st RQS, providing PJs—deployed to Turkey. These Air National Guard units, also called up under the presidential recall, came from Moffett, California.¹ Additionally, all three task forces were collocated with A-10 units to allow close coordination between the recovery helicopters and their support aircraft. Anticipating a swift-moving ground campaign, the task forces were organized and equipped to move forward into Iraq as coalition forces seized enemy airfields.

When the Iraqi airfield at Tallil fell on 4 April, one of the first flying units to arrive was a detachment of rescue helicopters and PJs from the 301st and 304th RQS.² After the installation of supporting communications, their crews went on immediate alert. As special operations forces (SOF) from the

United States, Great Britain, and Australia seized other airfields in the west and north, the other detachments in Jordan and Turkey did the same, dramatically reducing their response time across Iraq.

Naval Reserve helicopter-rescue units were also activated and deployed to the region. Veterans of combat in Operation Desert Storm, the sailors from Helicopter Rescue Squadron 4, based at Norfolk, Virginia, and from Helicopter Rescue Squadron 5, from San Diego, California, deployed with 180 personnel and eight HH-60H Seahawk helicopters.³

The Marine Corps, Army, and SOF units did not have formed rescue squadrons; rather, their tactical units contained embedded teams of helicopters and personnel designated to respond for immediate rescue. The Marines had “tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel” (TRAP) teams, and the Army had “disaster assistance response teams” (DART). Teams from the 5th Battalion of the 158th Aviation Regiment, known as Raptors, were organized to move with attack-helicopter units on deep attacks and provide an immediate-rescue capability for any downed aircrews.⁴ “It’s an American thing,” according to Chief Warrant Officer 5 (CW5) Warren Aylworth, tactical operations officer with the Raptors. “We always want to get our people out. We take that more seriously all the time.”⁵ Prior to the initiation of combat, the Raptors had been augmented with AH-64 helicopters, forming into Task Force Gabriel. Attached to V Corps, they would be immediately available for PR missions.⁶ SOF units designated helicopters for rescue duties within each formed assault element or task force. This preplanned element made for an almost seamless operation when its capabilities were needed. Additionally, SOF personnel were also prepared to employ nonconventional assisted--recovery assets when necessary.⁷ Clearly, the coalition forces enjoyed significant rescue support.

The rescue units and elements in the region came under the operational or tactical control of the theater joint search and rescue center (JSRC), brilliantly colocated with the combined air and space operations center (CAOC) at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. Directed by Lt Col Keith Sullivan, the JSRC had up to 52 personnel from all services and coalition partners assigned to it during the conflict.

The collocation of the JSRC in the CAOC did not occur by happenstance. Prior to combat operations, Gen Tommy Franks, commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), had appointed Lt Gen “Buzz” Moseley of the Air Force, the joint force air component commander, to serve as the theater’s personnel recovery coordinator (PRC) as well. After reviewing his designated responsibilities and authorities, General Moseley issued strong guidance:

I am the PRC and am therefore responsible to [General Franks] for ensuring the recovery of the joint force that may find themselves isolated from the main body. I hereby task and empower the JSRC to insure that this is done by the quickest, most capable PR force able to respond to the individual event, regardless of the component of “ownership.” The JSRC will task the most appropriate RCC [rescue coordination center] to conduct the recovery taking into account the individual capabilities and the requirements of the specific mission with time being the most critical factor.⁸

This arrangement gave Colonel Sullivan direct access to units that could actively search for and locate missing personnel or provide critical support to any task force designated for a recovery mission. As the battles ebbed and flowed, 27 subordinate rescue-coordination centers, located with various component headquarters and task forces, reported to the JSRC. All of them were well integrated by multiple communications links and inter-operable computer systems. As mandated by the JSRC, these headquarters would actually direct rescue or recovery missions as they occurred. Because of the physical presence of the JSRC in the CAOC, Sullivan could very quickly coordinate with commanders there for

any needed support. For the duration of the conflict, 55 assorted missions were executed at the direction of the JSRC.⁹ The available loss data indicates that five fixed-wing coalition aircraft (a British Tornado as well as an F-14, F-18, F-15E, and A-10) went down in enemy territory.

CENTCOM reported that a Patriot missile downed the Tornado, call sign Yahoo 76, on 23 March, killing both crew members—Flight Lt Kevin Main and Flight Lt David Williams from 9 Squadron, forward-based at Ali Al Salem in Kuwait. A helicopter team from Task Force Gabriel launched and spent several hours searching for the crew. They found one body before British troops arrived to secure the site. Proper communication, navigation, and traffic-control procedures should have prevented such an unfortunate turn of events.¹⁰ But a subsequent investigation indicated that the identification, friend or foe (IFF) system on the Tornado had failed. Since the aircraft had just started to descend as it approached Kuwait and the pilot had not yet made radio contact with the traffic controllers, the aircraft was identified as an inbound antiradiation missile, and the Patriot battery fired in self-defense.¹¹

A similar incident occurred less than 24 hours later. A flight of four F-16 CJs from the 22d Fighter Squadron was supporting a large formation of strike aircraft hitting targets in the Baghdad area when a Patriot battery of the 5th Battalion, 52d Air Defense Artillery Regiment, located near An-Najaf, accidentally targeted it. Unfortunately for the Patriot unit, these particular F-16s were equipped to locate and destroy enemy surface-to-air-missile (SAM) forces. To the detection gear on the F-16, the Patriot radar signal appeared as an SA-2 site. Since the Iraqi air-defense units still used the SA-2 system, the flight lead assumed that the site was an enemy position trying to shoot them down. Reacting instinctively, he launched a missile, which guided to the site and did considerable damage to the radar equipment but did not harm the Patriot crew.¹²

Navy sources reported that mechanical failure involving the fuel system forced down the F-14, call sign Junker 14, on 1 April. Assigned to Fighter Squadron 154 aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk*, the aircraft was over southern Iraq when the crew safely ejected.¹³ Two Air Force HH-60s from the 66th RQS, led by Maj Chris Barnett and using the call signs Vampire 25 and 26, scrambled to pick up the crew members, who landed 80 miles southwest of Karbala. They rendezvoused with a flight of A-10s led by Maj Jim “Rainman” Stephenson from the Massachusetts Air National Guard, who had located the survivors and acted as the on-scene commander. The survivors’ lack of familiarity with their rescue equipment and procedures caused some confusion among the rescue forces. Regardless, under the watchful eye of the “Sandy” A-10s, the helicopters proceeded directly to the survivors’ locations and successfully rescued both men. “Once we heard the guys coming to get us it was a great feeling,” said the pilot, Lt Chad Vincelette.¹⁴

Disaster struck the *Kitty Hawk* again the next day when an F-18, call sign Dogwood 02, from Fighter Squadron 195 aboard that ship went down southwest of Baghdad. Task Force Gabriel launched a helicopter team that initiated the search for the pilot, Lt Nathan White, but he had died in the crash. Helicopters from the 301st RQS also responded and joined the intensive search for White. The recovery crews found the wreckage of the F-18 and the remains of the pilot. Two weeks later, a spokesman for CENTCOM revealed that a Patriot missile had downed White’s aircraft.¹⁵ Concerned about such incidents of surface-to-air fratricide, Gen Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “We’ll have to investigate each one of them, see if it was a breakdown in our techniques or our procedures or if there was a technical breakdown that we have to shore up.”¹⁶

On 6 April an Air Force F-15E, call sign Borax 56, from the 333d Fighter Squadron, based at Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina, went down near Mosul. Specifically designed for low-level attack, the aircraft apparently flew into the ground. A rescue task force of helicopters and A-10s launched and

proceeded to the crash site, despite the number of active enemy air defenses in the vicinity. A large aerial armada gathered over the area, prepared to battle enemy defenses in order to enable rescue operations. During suppression of the threat, even KC-135 and KC-10 tankers took station in the area so as to sustain operations.¹⁷ But the rescuers never made contact with the two crew members; on 23 April the Department of Defense announced that the pilot, Capt Eric Das, and weapons-systems operator, Maj William Watkins III, had been killed. A special forces team recovered their remains.¹⁸

The next day, a handheld SAM hit an A-10. The explosion damaged the right engine and flight controls, knocking out both hydraulic systems. But the pilot, Capt Kim Campbell of the 75th Fighter Squadron from Pope AFB, North Carolina, flew the A-10—designed to survive severe battle damage—back to Kuwait and landed at Ali Al Salem Air Base. Her calmness and professionalism saved the aircraft, obviating the need for another rescue mission.¹⁹

On 8 April, an enemy SAM hit another A-10, call sign Facing 43, as it supported the advance of the 3d Infantry Division through the southern suburbs of Baghdad. The pilot, Maj Jim Ewald of the 110th Fighter Squadron from the Michigan Air National Guard, was advised that he could use the Baghdad airport, recently secured, as an emergency field. His aircraft still flyable, Ewald instead chose to head south in hopes of returning to Tallil or perhaps Kuwait. He flew for about 10 minutes until the aircraft began to yaw uncontrollably and then ejected. His wingman, Facing 44, assumed on-scene command responsibilities, noted his position, and began to initiate CSAR procedures.

Floating to the ground, Ewald took shelter among some reeds along a canal. Concerned about Fedayeen Saddam paramilitary units active in the area, he heard his aircraft crash and mistook the exploding ordnance as enemy fire. Fortunately, American troops from the 54th Engineer Battalion of the 3d Infantry Division watched his descent and sent a forward team in a Bradley fighting vehicle to his location. Jim heard what he thought were American voices but remained cautious. Hearing the clarion call, “Hey pilot dude! Come out, we are Americans,” Ewald broke cover and sprinted to the Bradley, whose soldiers pulled him inside and sped away. He then pulled out his survival radio and let Facing 44 know that he was with friendlies. An hour after arriving at a nearby field hospital, Ewald was on his way back to Kuwait in a helicopter from the 301st RQS. Two days later, he resumed flying combat.²⁰

Overall, coalition fixed-wing aircraft flew 15,825 strike sorties during the war.²¹ Only the one A-10 was lost to enemy action for a minuscule loss rate of .0063 percent, continuing a trend of ever-fewer aircraft lost per combat sortie that reaches back to World War II. Many reasons account for this trend: better-built aircraft; better tactics; better support equipment, such as electronic jamming pods and decoy flares; better crew training; and a well-established ability to seize air superiority by quickly destroying any significant aerial resistance.

The Iraqis, however, claimed to have shot down numerous coalition aircraft, at one point early in the war even staging what appeared to be the capture of coalition Airmen who had parachuted into the Tigris River in downtown Baghdad. The Al-Jazeera satellite-television channel duly covered the event as Iraqi troops combed the reeds growing along both banks and fired their rifles into the water in a vain attempt to flush out hiding Airmen. When queried, both US and British spokesmen denied that any aircraft or personnel were missing.²² Truthfully, Iraqi air defenses did achieve some level of success, shooting down a number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), which the United States and its allies had begun to use more frequently.²³ British forces used their Phoenix UAV extensively for artillery spotting and forward-air-control duties, losing four to enemy fire. Orbiting at low altitudes and slow speeds, these aircraft made easy targets. The British reported the loss of 23 UAVs in the conflict, several when they purposely flew them beyond range because of operational necessity.²⁴ From a PR perspective, their

losses were unimportant because UAVs do not need rescue operations. Obviously, the best PR tactic is to prevent any manned aircraft from being shot down.

Dedicated rescue forces were also used on several occasions for medical evacuation of ground personnel. Although such evacuation is not doctrinally a PR mission, CENTCOM commanders decided to use rescue assets when available for this vital task. In another action on 23 March, a rescue task force of HH-60s, A-10s, and an HC-130 tanker scrambled to recover critically wounded personnel in an Army special forces team trapped near Baghdad. Reminiscent of the recoveries of such teams along the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war in Southeast Asia, the A-10s flew combat air patrol, suppressing fierce enemy action as the helicopters swooped in and extracted the endangered troops. The HC-130 then descended below the low clouds to refuel the helicopter so that it could return to home base.²⁵ The same scenario occurred almost verbatim on 7 April when a similar rescue task force recovered another trapped Army team. As one Air Force rescue pilot remarked, “It really comes back to that cliché that we don’t leave anybody behind.”²⁶

Surely the most dramatic PR event of the conflict was the operation on 2 April to rescue the Army’s Pfc Jessica Lynch, taken prisoner several days earlier when Iraqi forces ambushed her unit—a maintenance company—in the city of An Nasiriyah, killing several fellow soldiers and capturing five others. But rescue forces per se did not conduct this operation although the task force included a few Air Force PJs. Rather, Navy SEALs directly supported by Army Rangers carried out this direct-action mission, which also involved a large Marine diversionary action carried out by Task Force Tarawa nearby and an air strike by AV-8 Harriers on a Baath Party headquarters. Additionally, Marine snipers and special forces teams entered the city to kill Baathists and collect intelligence. Marine CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters inserted the large joint-force ground element as a large armada of Air Force AC-130 gunships, Marine AH-1W attack helicopters, and Army MH-6 Little Birds orbited above to provide immediate fire support. Moving quickly, the substantial force neutralized the area, entered an enemy-held hospital in the city, and recovered Lynch.²⁷ In terms of audacity, it rivaled the great Son Tay raid into North Vietnam in 1970—although, unlike that raid, it actually freed an American, the first one since World War II. More importantly, it showed to the world the lengths to which the United States would go to rescue its personnel.

At the same time, another task force of mostly intelligence personnel was combing through liberated Iraqi intelligence centers and prisons, looking for an American Navy pilot still missing from the Gulf War of 1991. Capt Michael Speicher’s F/A-18 went down on the first night of the conflict. He never made contact with search aircraft or elements, and his precise position remained unknown until the wreckage of his aircraft was found after the war. Initially, he was classified as killed in action, but the secretary of the Navy reclassified that status as “missing in action, captured” in October 2001.²⁸ All efforts to date have failed to locate Speicher; however, what appear to be his initials were found scratched into a cell wall in the Hakimiyah prison in Baghdad. His case remains open, even as all personnel missing from the Gulf War of 2003 have been found.²⁹

Rotary-wing (helicopter) losses were higher than those of fixed-wing aircraft, described above. Open reports indicate that as many as 15 helicopters were lost, although only three to enemy action. Regardless, all were tragic. Intraservice rescue operations recovered most downed personnel. The crew members of a special forces MH-53, the first coalition-aircraft loss of the war, was picked up by another special forces helicopter and flown to their home base. The aircraft itself was destroyed.³⁰ The same day, a Marine CH-46E of Helicopter Squadron 268 from New River, North Carolina, crashed in Kuwait as it ferried troops to Umm Qasr in southern Iraq, killing all 14 American and British soldiers aboard. There was no rescue operation.³¹ Also lost at the beginning of combat operations, an AH-64 Apache

assigned to the 11th Aviation Regiment from Illesheim Airfield, Germany, was shot down as Army forces began their move into Iraq. Helicopters from Task Force Gabriel began to launch for recovery operations when they received notification that other Army units had recovered its crew.³²

A second AH-64, this one assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 227th Aviation Regiment (1/227) from Fort Hood, Texas, went down in a multibattalion raid against enemy armored units near Karbala on 24 March. Commanded and controlled by the 11th Aviation Regiment, the attack was designed as a classic “deep-strike” mission, something that Army aviation has been developing for several years. Gen Wesley Clark, USA, retired, described it on Cable News Network as “the first Army doctrinal deep attack mission. We’ve trained for this mission for about 18 years. It was designed to go against the Soviets. We applied it against the 2nd Brigade of the Medina Division. We had good results on this mission. We took out a bunch of T-72s, artillery and infantry. On the other hand, it was a firefight, and we took return fire.”³³

Unfortunately, the raid suffered from poor planning. Supporting and suppressive fires lacked proper coordination, and the action was not synchronized with parallel operations by Air Force, Navy, and Marine fighter attacks. Additionally, instead of attacking from the west over a larger lake, the helicopters were routed directly over well-lit urban areas, affecting the night vision of the crews and alerting the Iraqis. Concentrated and massive enemy small-arms fire downed the Apache, call sign Vampire 12. Other Army helicopters tried to recover the crew, but fire from enemy forces in the area kept them away. Another Apache, Palerider 16, also sustained heavy damage but managed to fly out of the area as a wounded crew member blocked the emergency frequency with continuous calls for help.

Scheduled to launch with the strike force, Task Force Gabriel had no fuel because its tanker trucks had not arrived at the refueling point at Objective Rams, 80 miles south of Baghdad. Consequently, the helicopters remained on the ground 20 minutes away, unable to help. Alerted for the mission, HH-60s of the 66th RQS received quite a surprise when they learned that the downed aircraft was using the call sign Vampire 12—a confusing turn of events because the two rescue helicopters’ call signs, assigned by the air tasking order, were Vampire 11 and 12. As a result, they did not launch, but two A-10s from Al Jaber did support the rescue effort. The 1/227 commander, flying in a UH-60, tried to get in to rescue the men; however, he had to abandon the attempt when blocked radio frequencies and stiff enemy resistance prevented him from either communicating with or finding the survivors. Crewmen CW2 Ronald Young and CW2 David Williams were captured.³⁴ The men of Task Force Gabriel were very upset about their inability to launch and at least attempt the recovery. In fact, their helicopters would not receive any fuel until 27 March.³⁵

One enemy commander used a simple expedient to defend against the Apaches: seeing them in flight, he used his cell phone to call nearby units and warn them. Alerted, they concentrated fire from their massed guns against the interlopers, inflicting considerable damage on the aircraft as they tried to hover and direct their precision missiles against Iraqi targets. Army planners had just not dedicated enough support to eliminate or suppress the guns so that the Apaches could safely operate. This expensive lesson taught the aviation-unit commander to adjust tactics so that subsequent raids followed Air Force and Navy attack aircraft, which beat down the guns and achieved a level of air superiority sufficient for helicopters to operate. According to Lt Gen William Wallace, V Corps commander, “We learned from our mistakes, we adjusted and adapted based on what we learned, and we still used the Apache helicopter in a significant role during the course of the fight.”³⁶

Other instances of helicopter casualties, both combat and noncombat, occurred during Iraqi Freedom, all of them tragic losses. On 21 March two Royal Navy Sea King helicopters collided over the northern

Arabian Gulf, killing one US and six British personnel.³⁷ Nine days later, a UH-1N assigned to Marine Helicopter Squadron 169 from Camp Pendleton, California, crashed on takeoff at night from a forward operating location in southern Iraq and killed three troops on board. Rescue forces evacuated a fourth marine, critically wounded in the crash.³⁸ On 1 April a Marine AV-8 Harrier crashed while trying to land at night on the USS *Nassau*. A Navy search-and-rescue helicopter recovered the pilot, who had successfully ejected.³⁹ The next day a UH-60 from the 2d Battalion of the 3d Aviation Regiment, Fort Stewart, Georgia, was shot down by small-arms fire near Karbala. Task Force Gabriel was alerted for the mission, but an armored task force reached the site first, recovering the four wounded soldiers and seven bodies.⁴⁰ Two crew members lost their lives when their AH-1W, assigned to Marine Helicopter Squadron 267, also from Camp Pendleton, crashed in central Iraq on 3 April from noncombat causes. Overall, enemy fire badly damaged 49 Marine helicopters. None was lost, but some required extensive repairs.⁴¹ Finally, after a US Navy CH-46E crashed in the Mediterranean during deck-to-deck resupply operations, local rescue elements picked up the crew.⁴²

As the war sped towards its inevitable conclusion, allied intelligence sources searched in vain for the soldiers captured with Private Lynch and for the two helicopter pilots shot down in the massive AH-64 raid on 24 March. Had the soldiers been positively located, another special forces raid undoubtedly would have attempted to rescue them. But as Marine Task Force Tripoli moved north towards Tikrit, an Iraqi civilian informed one of the lead elements that seven Americans were being held in a small village just to the north. Moving cautiously, the marines entered the village and freed the soldiers—the five from Lynch's unit and the two Apache crew members. Helicopters from Task Force Gabriel flew them to their repatriation site. All seven were in good condition, although three had been wounded in the process of being captured. CW2 Ronald Young, one of the rescued pilots, said, "We feel like we won the lottery of life."⁴³ Advised of their release, President Bush stated, "Today is a great day for the families, comrades, and loved ones of the seven MIAs who are now free. . . . It's a good way to start the morning, to be notified that seven of our fellow Americans are going to be home soon in the arms of their loved ones."⁴⁴

CENTCOM reported that 55 recovery missions—almost half of them medical evacuations—saved a total of 73 personnel. Additionally, it noted the following:

1. All personnel reported as missing were either recovered or accounted for.
2. The Lynch recovery was the first successful liberation of a prisoner of war (POW) since World War II.
3. The JSRC was the largest and most integrated ever.
4. The dedicated PR force deployed to the theater was the most robust since Vietnam.
5. SOF personnel employed nonconventional, assisted-recovery assets in many rescues, the liberation of the POWs, and all accounting actions.⁴⁵

After the conflict, all major service components produced lessons-learned. Based on inputs from the combatant commands (especially CENTCOM), the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, developed several such lessons specifically for the personnel-recovery mission area. They are now being addressed for corrective action.

Overall, as the results noted above show, our personnel-recovery efforts in Operation Iraqi Freedom were very successful. But the issues under consideration in these lessons-learned indicate that much work remains. Regardless, our strong and steadfast commitment to personnel recovery is encapsulated in the timeless motto of the rescue forces: *These things we do so that others may live—to return with honor.*

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Notes

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