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COMBAT SEARCH AND RESCUE - THE CINC'S DILEMMA

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by

Commander J. W. Mullarky, USN

Commander S. W. Taylor, USN
Project Advisor

U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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Combat search and rescue is a specific task performed by rescue forces to effect the recovery of distressed personnel in a wartime, preemptive strike or contingency environment. This task lends itself to microscopic clinical analysis at the tactical level and passionate discourse at every level. Born in World War II, developed in Korea and proven in Vietnam, combat search and rescue has all but been abandoned by the current armed forces. This paper will attempt to define force objectives and mission responsibility as viewed from a CINC's perspective.

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ABSTRACT

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Combat search and rescue is a specific task performed by rescue forces to effect the recovery of distressed personnel in a wartime, preemptive strike or contingency environment. This task lends itself to microscopic clinical analysis at the tactical level and passionate discourse at every level. Born in World War II, developed in Korea and proven in Vietnam, combat search and rescue has all but been abandoned by the current armed forces. This paper will attempt to define force objectives and mission responsibility as viewed from a CINC's perspective.

INTRODUCTION

A plethora of articles, papers and discussions have explored virtually every aspect of combat search and rescue since the beginning of the Vietnam conflict. This subject lends itself to microscopic clinical analysis at the tactical level and passionate discourse at every level. Every military journal and civilian weekly has been quick to dissect each post-Vietnam mission, usually focusing their analyses on the tactics or hardware involved. Generally, these analyses touch upon only the tip of the iceberg - an iceberg called combat search and rescue.

Why do we concentrate so much of our energy and study on such a small portion of the search and rescue issue? Certainly that's what interests the practitioners, and the practitioners usually do the writing. Who else knows more about the mission or has a keener interest in the ways and means of accomplishing it than they? Further, like the tip of the iceberg, tactics and hardware are tangible. You can see them, touch them, put your arms around them. Even so, the oddest thing about all this is that within the military, it is only the rescue practitioners that do the writing. Very rarely is an article on combat search and rescue ever penned by a warrior who at some future date may require this service. Such a lack of interest may be due to the warrior/aviator mentality, whose attitude is "that isn't going to happen to me, I'm good, I'm careful. That's the other guys'

problem." Whatever the reason, much of the search and rescue iceberg remains below the surface. But as with every iceberg, below the surface lurks the real danger.

Part of that danger resides in the failure of the Services to adequately identify where responsibility for the combat search and rescue mission lies. Assignment and acknowledgment of such responsibility is extremely critical, because this directly affects each CINC's ability to successfully conduct combat search and rescue missions in his area of operations. Fixes for the tangible problems (i.e. tactics and hardware) tend to be tangible themselves and generally, things that you can reach out and touch lend themselves to readily accessible solutions. However, as with the iceberg, the deeper problem is more difficult to reduce. This paper will explore the deeper problem, the problem of the CINC's ability to successfully conduct the combat search and rescue mission. In doing so I will attempt to define force objectives and mission responsibility from a CINC's perspective. It is from this perspective that an actual mission will be prosecuted and from the CINC's vantage point that the remainder of the iceberg can be seen and thus reduced.

HISTORY

No discussion of the combat search and rescue issue would be complete without a history of the mission. First, however, a

definition of combat search and rescue is in order. Very simply, it is a specific task performed by rescue forces to affect the successful recovery of distressed personnel from a hostile environment.[1] The definition applies to all Services, joint or combined operations, in any theatre or area of operations; it recognizes that distressed personnel may be someone other than aviators.

Combat search and rescue is relatively new to the art of war. Indeed even as late as World war I there is no information to suggest that the concept existed. Its interest and birth in its own right appears to be directly linked to the increasing sophistication of the airplane, improved anti-air warfare and the deep strike missions of World War II. Although we employed airplanes as weapons of war in World War I, it seems that any aviator lucky enough to survive the crash was on his own once he was back on terra firma.

In World War II, belligerents on both sides developed an organized approach to recovering their own downed aviators. While this itself is not unusual, it seems an odd coincidence that each side in both theatres concentrated rescue efforts mainly on over-water recovery. In the Pacific this over-riding concern is understandable, since most of the major battles included seabased aircraft. But in Europe this was not the case. Yet it was in the maritime arena that combat search and rescue was

forged. In the Pacific, submarines, surface ships and seaplanes could be extended across a line of battle. Indeed, President Bush was rescued by a submarine after being shot down in the Pacific. In Europe, the majority of both the Allied and German combat search and rescue effort was concentrated in the English Channel using similar tactics that had already proven successful in the Pacific. Overland rescue in both theatres was difficult at best. In the Pacific it might take weeks for a rescue party to hack its way through dense jungle. And in Europe it took just as long for the partisan network to move an airman through occupied territory.[2]

The Korean War dramatically demonstrated the utility of overland rescue. Such rescues depended largely on the improved capability of the helicopter. Although helicopters had been utilized in China at the end of World War II, they arrived too late to really impact on rescue efforts. However, in Korea the U.S. Air Force Rescue Service (ARS) recovered about ten percent of the aircrews that went down inside North Korea. This was a significant improvement over the virtual absence of overland rescue in World War II.[3] The Navy also played a role in combat search and rescue in Korea. During the conflict, aircraft carriers first received their own organic plane guard helicopters providing them with an overland rescue capability. Later in the Korean War, Navy helicopters would also fly combat search and rescue missions

deep into enemy territory.[4]

Because of decreased military expenditures following the Korean War, the U.S. military essentially abandoned combat search and rescue as a mission. Thus, we had to relearn the same hard lessons in Vietnam.[5] During the early years of the conflict, we had no doctrine to fall back on so the Services took an "ad hoc" approach to combat search and rescue. Rescue mission planning was virtually non-existent and tactical commanders looked upon combat search and rescue as "have helicopter, will travel." This resulted in unacceptably high accident rates and heavy combat losses within the rescue forces.[6] The Navy alone lost one rescue aircraft for every 1.4 overland rescues and one lost crew member for every two rescues.[7] For the Navy this equated to a total of 109 aircraft lost during the performance of combat search and rescue missions. [8] These statistics must not in any way diminish the heroism of the rescue crews involved or besmirch their efforts to redevelop the tactics and doctrine abandoned after Korea. But they serve to point out the painful waste of human and materiel assets when past lessons learned are disregarded.

Combat search and rescue has evolved over time taking full advantage of the emergence of new technology. In order to survive in a modern threat environment it must continue to do so. It is a complex operation requiring rapid response, extensive coordination and sophisticated equipment. As time progresses,

combat search and rescue will become increasingly more difficult and will require increasingly specialized aircrew skills. Today's propensity towards contingency response does not provide for a long learning curve and historical lessons indicate we cannot afford the expense in personnel or platforms to relearn history.

PRESENT REQUIREMENTS AND ORGANIZATION

We have noted what happened to combat search and rescue following Korea and the hard lessons relearned in Vietnam. We now must ask what has happened since Vietnam. Have we in fact learned from our previous mistakes? The answer is not entirely affirmative. As in the two previous conflicts, the combat search and rescue capability was systematically dismantled following Vietnam. By 1975, the Navy had transferred all combat search and rescue assets to the reserve component. On the other hand, the Air Force maintained an adequate capability until the late 1980s. (However, neither the Army nor the Marine Corps has had a dedicated combat search and rescue capability since Korea.) Unfortunately, in 1987 Air Force combat search and rescue capability was gutted when the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service was required to transfer assets to the newly formed Air Force Special Operations Force, which is a part of the United States Special

Operations Command. This left the Air Force with only seventeen Primary Authorized Aircraft (PAA) dedicated to the combat search and rescue mission, the lowest number since the inception of ARS in 1946.[9] Although the assets transferred are capable of performing the combat search and rescue mission, Special Operations Command (SOC) forces are not tasked with and would not normally be called upon to perform a combat search and rescue mission unless it involved the rescue of organic SOC forces. These reorganizations really present a problem for each one of the geographic CINC's.[10]

JCS PUB 0-2 clearly delineates the responsibility of the individual services to provide combat search and rescue forces in support of their own operations.[11] Yet we have seen that this capability is no longer really available in any service.

Thus the CINC's have a real quandary. How can a CINC plan an operation, especially for a contingency environment, which might include combat search and rescue when dedicated aircraft and trained crews are not being provided by the services and therefore, are not in his arsenal? Must we regress back to "ad hoc" planning for this extremely critical combat support mission?

During a time when "peace is breaking out all over," it might be said that the need for a combat search and rescue capability has never been lower. However, analysis of the U.S.'s use of military force as a national instrument of power clearly

refutes this hypothesis. Since World War II, America has called upon its military forces in over 250 instances to demonstrate American political resolve.[12] On many of these occasions, combat search and rescue was required. Demonstration of military force has long been a powerful element in American diplomacy and surely will continue to be. The New Testament appropriately asks "...[W]hat king marches against another king for war, without first sitting down to consider...will he be able to cope with the enemy."[13] If that king were a U.S. CINC, he'd better also consider whether or not he has sufficient combat search and rescue capability.

If U.S. soldiers/airmen were captured and held as hostages, they could easily negate any leverage created by the use of military force. Vietnam, Lebanon and Iran provide recent examples of the impact that hostages can play in American foreign policy. During the 1986 Libyan Raid, had the Air Force plane that was lost gone down over land and the pilots survived, it is doubtful that our meager combat search and rescue capability could have successfully extracted them. Can you imagine the impact and leverage Col. Khadaffi could have achieved by showing up on the six o'clock news with two U.S. airmen? The thought is chilling! Given American preoccupation with hostages, such an incident could create considerable turbulence in public support for government policy.

With the probability of "come as you are" wars increasing as bipolar tensions decrease, combat search and rescue will become even more important. If we are able to pick and choose the time and location of all future conflicts, then we can marginally make-do by calling up reserves and reallocating resources among the CINC's. But if we are drawn into a conflict not of our own choosing, then we are heading for a disaster. Whenever an opposing force captures an American soldier or airman, the CINC, his staff, the American public and the news media will become preoccupied with U.S. combat search and rescue capability. Such concerns will surely redirect strike force assets to that mission. In 1969, 336 sorties were flown in support of a single rescue operation.[14] Given the extraordinary political clout hostages provide to an enemy today, there is every reason to believe that any CINC would be obliged to do the same.

A well trained and fully equipped combat search and rescue force can obviate the possibility of hostages and thus be a combat multiplier for the CINC. Not only do they return an experienced warrior to the CINC and deprive the enemy of a hostage, but they also can significantly reduce the amount of collateral support required from the striking forces, thereby freeing them to pursue their primary mission. Unfortunately, combat search and rescue is treated by the Services like sealift: during peacetime no one wants to spend limited dollars on a support capability

that will likely grow obsolete before it is used, but in wartime no one can get enough sealift or combat search and rescue.

Both the Air Force and Navy are taking steps to improve their combat search and rescue capability. In May 1989, Commander in Chief, Military Airlift Command (CINCMAC) ordered the re-establishment of the Air Rescue Service (ARS). When complete in 1994, the Air Force plan will provide a dedicated, modern combat search and rescue capability under the direct operational control of Headquarters MAC. What remains to be accomplished is to establish command structures within the theatres to decentralize command and control and provide the CINC's with a credible capability. With some organizational modifications this plan has the potential to eventually meet the CINC's requirements and those of JCS PUB 0-2.

The Navy, on the other hand, has chosen a dual track approach. It is modernizing and expanding its dedicated combat search and rescue capability in the reserves while training a limited number of helicopter flight crews in each active duty squadron in combat search and rescue tactics. While this is certainly an improvement over previous capability it is probably not the answer to the CINC's dilemma.

CONCLUSIONS

U.S. combat search and rescue capability will not improve of itself, yet there is no real indication of improvement from the CINC's perspective in this vital mission area. Both the Air Force and Navy combat search and rescue modernization programs are being implemented to satisfy the requirements of JCS PUB 0-2 and the needs of the individual Services. What these solutions still fail to address is the larger scope of operations and the requirements of the CINC. What I am describing here is an enigma within combat search and rescue. It has been there in every conflict since World War II (at least in the beginning) and it remains so today. When the need for combat search and rescue is eventually recognized the initial solution is to throw money at it. After the Services acquire new platforms and ultimately concentrate on training and tactics the process ends. Rarely do the solutions leap above to the operational level and take a macro view of the combat search and rescue mission. JCS PUB 0-2 adds to the problem because it fails to address combat search and rescue from the CINC's perspective and instead remains at the tactical level addressing only Service requirements. Thus even when the JCS requirements are met the problem remains. The enigma here is that in spite of spending more money, increasing training and improving tactics the capability has not improved.

Combat search and rescue is a CINC's responsibility and it clearly will take a solution mandated by the CINC's to improve it.

Over the past two decades there has been a serious erosion of the combat search and rescue capability available to the CINC's. Current U.S. mission posture is woefully inadequate in comparison to the requirements. Contributing to the problem is the general lack of understanding by the Service planners of what the mission is about and what its future should be as demonstrated by their efforts to resolve the capability gap. In order to create the type of force required to successfully execute the mission in a preemptive strike, wartime or contingency environment, the warfighting CINC's must establish combat search and rescue as a high priority on their list of funded requirements. Only this kind of emphasis will force the individual Services to provide the combat search and rescue capability that remains so lacking in the operational forces, despite the requirements set forth in JCS PUB 0-2.[15]

From the CINC's perspective, combat search and rescue force objectives must be:

1. Both organic to assigned forces and within the CINC's area of operations to facilitate rapid response and force integration.
2. Capable of operating in the same environment as the striking force.

3. Able to perform effectively in joint or combined operations.

4. A well trained and equipped ready force, rehearsed in all scenarios for operations under the CINC's control.

In the interim, until adequate combat search and rescue capability is available and apportioned as previously discussed, measures must be taken to shore up existing weaknesses.

The CINCs already possess the means to improve their combat search and rescue capability for the near team. But such efforts may have a somewhat deleterious effect on other mission areas. The bridge to this capability gap can be provided by the CINC temporarily tasking his organic Special Operations Command (SOC) and Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) forces with the combat search and rescue mission. They are the best trained and equipped forces under the CINC's purview to accomplish the mission today. Although these elements are sure to "cry foul," this mission has many similarities to missions for which SOC and MEU forces already train. These force elements are ideal because they are organic to the CINC and capable of operating with the striking forces, since they are a part of it. These steps can provide the CINC with a capable combat search and rescue force now while compelling the Services to take the necessary steps to rectify their individual lack of present capability. This would be a temporary arrangement, because as the Services acquire the plat-

forms and trained crews necessary to accomplish the mission they would re-assume the tasking from SOC and MEU forces. The bottom line here is that in spite of good intentions and improving capabilities, the CINCs must keep combat search and rescue a funded priority. With major budget reductions looming in the future, the Air Force plan may fall victim to the fiscal ax before it is complete in 1994 and the Navy must be persuaded to realign its combat search and rescue capability under the active forces. Moreover, both Services must assign elements of their combat search and rescue forces to the CINCs in order to meet the force objectives previously outlined.

The warfighting CINCs are required to respond quickly and decisively to meet and defeat any threat to the United States or its interests. To carry out this critical mission, they need a well trained, equipped and rehearsed combat search and rescue capability - today and in the future. They have not always recognized their need for combat search and rescue, but the CINCs have always needed it! Admiral Jeremiah Denton, a former Naval aviator and Vietnam prisoner of war, insightfully summed up the priority combat search and rescue requires. He noted, "Those of us not rescued in Vietnam but fortunate enough to survive the mental and physical rigors and anguish of prisoner internment know first hand the costs of inadequate combat search and rescue - costs measured in human spirit, morale, lives and dollars. Difficult as it may be to project those costs precisely, it is

predictable that the cost in possible future conflict will greatly exceed those of past wars unless actions are taken to accord a high peacetime priority to the combat search and rescue mission."[16] If we take heed, lessons from the past will pave the way for future successes.

ENDNOTES

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