

# Disaster at Desert One: Catalyst for Change

JOHN E. VALLIERE

A military raid is . . . a high-risk venture that operates on the outer margins of the possible, relying on skill, daring, and a goodly measure of luck. When a raid succeeds, it acquires almost magical qualities and endows its authors with the badge of genius. Hence the appeal. When it fails, it invites ridicule and the second-guessing of armchair strategists.

— Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*

**T**he failure of the mission in 1980 to rescue American hostages held in Tehran is well known. Few can forget the tragedy vividly pictured by a broken propeller resting on the dry lake bed at a place forever known as “Desert One.” As America awoke on the morning of 25 April of that year, it was faced with defeat, sadness, and—most of all—questions.

The disaster immediately raised doubts about US military capabilities and the state of readiness of the armed forces. . . . The seeming ineptness of the operation stood in stark contrast with successful rescue operations conducted with little loss of life by the Israelis at Entebbe and by the West Germans at Mogadishu. . . . To some analysts and journalists, the episode demonstrated that the Defense Department was incapable of mounting a combined assault, especially in distant territory.<sup>1</sup>

The questions and doubts were only reinforced four months later when the JCS released a declassified version of the report of the Special Operations Review Group analyzing the failure. The so-called *Holloway Report* revealed serious deficiencies in mission planning, command and control, and interservice operability.<sup>2</sup> The Holloway group provided a catalyst for efforts to reorganize the Department of Defense, as finally realized in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation.

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## *The Planned Operation*

The first phase of the operation, the only part carried out, involved the rendezvous of a planned eight US Navy RH-53D minesweeping helicopters and six US Air Force C-130 cargo planes at Desert One.<sup>3</sup> This part of the plan, code-named Eagle Claw, was not a simple operation.<sup>4</sup> To make it work many different elements had to come together. It was, indeed, a “high-risk venture” operating on “a goodly measure of luck.” That is true of many strategically important but necessarily daring military operations.

The C-130s brought fuel for the helicopters and the rescue force itself—Colonel Charlie Beckwith’s US-based Special Forces, some additional US Army Special Forces from Europe, and assorted military, civilian, and Iranian helpers. The C-130s were to arrive first. The helicopters, flown by US Marine Corps pilots led by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Seiffert, would arrive next, having launched from the carrier *Nimitz* in the Persian Gulf at nightfall.<sup>5</sup>

After refueling the helicopters, which would then fly on to “Desert Two” where the daylight hours would be spent in hiding, the C-130s would depart. Once cloaked again by darkness, the rescuers would be driven into Tehran in locally procured trucks and assault the US Embassy.<sup>6</sup> With the freed hostages, they would next be flown in the helicopters to an abandoned Iranian airfield at Manzariyeh. Waiting there would be US Air Force C-141s and MC-130s ready to fly everyone out.

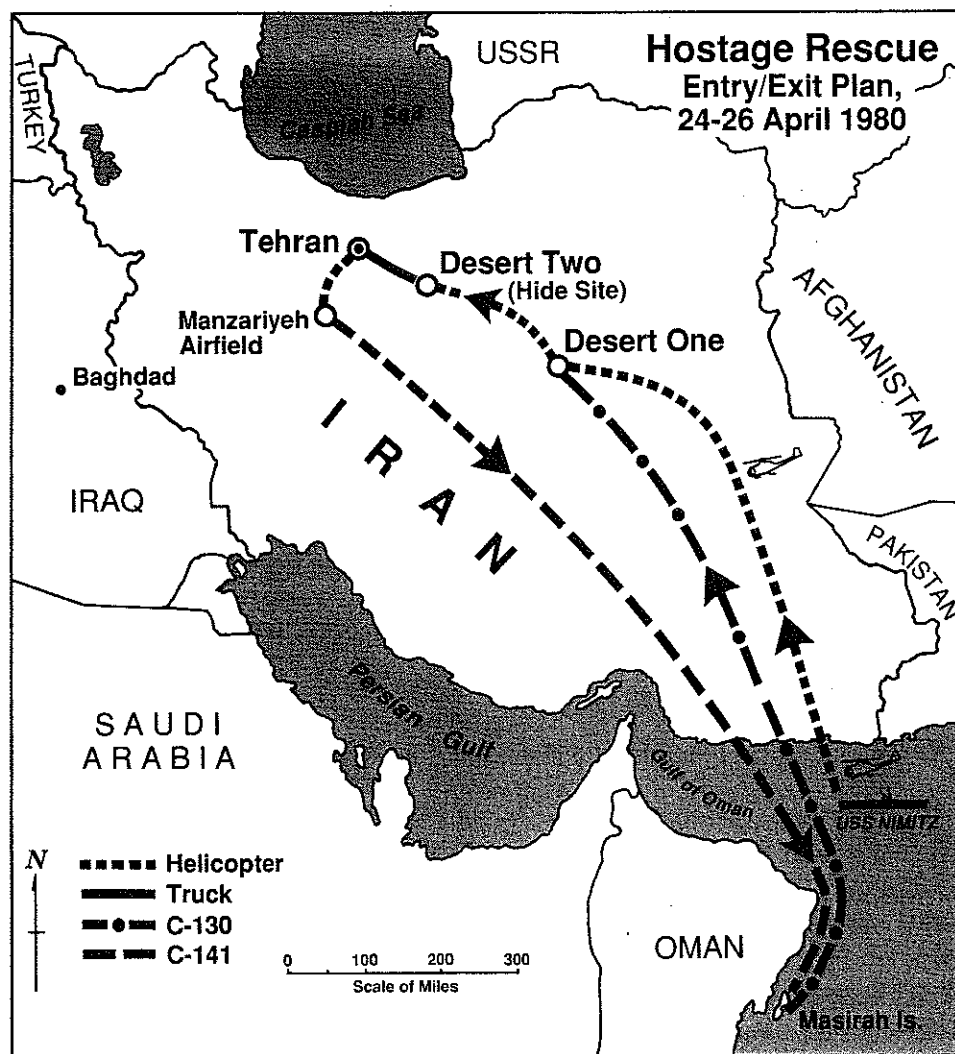
The complex plan relied on extended low-level flights by all participating aircraft to avoid detection. Using knowledge of the somewhat limited though modern Iranian radar system, routes were planned to exploit gaps in the coverage. These gaps existed at low altitudes, allowing the helicopters and the C-130s to arrive at Desert One virtually undetected.

It all unraveled when mechanical failure struck the helicopters and when the Marine pilots encountered weather conditions far worse than anything they had been led to expect. Two helicopters failed to reach the Desert One rendezvous (one was abandoned en route, the other forced by equipment failures and a thick dust cloud, a “haboob,” to return to the *Nimitz*), and a third arrived at the refueling site with a massive failure of its hydraulic system.

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Jim Kister, USAWC, adapted from Delta Force, by Beckwith and Knox.

Colonel Beckwith's recommendation to abort at that point was quickly approved by Washington. The attempt had already failed when tragedy struck. During the abort a helicopter hit a fuel-laden C-130, killing eight. From there the recriminations and questions begin.

### Prologue

President Jimmy Carter decided, almost immediately after learning hostages had been taken in Tehran, that military options had to be available. NSC staffer Gary Sick later said, "The possibility of military action always lay just beneath the surface of events and served as a counterpoint to roller-coaster negotiations."<sup>7</sup> The White House expected the military action to attempt a rescue or retaliate or both. The President appointed National

Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to “coordinate and oversee the development of military courses of action.”<sup>8</sup> President Carter described in his diary his guidance to the military:

We want it to be quick, incisive, surgical, no loss of American lives, not involve any other country, minimal suffering of the Iranian people themselves . . . sure of success, and unpredictable. No one will know what I have decided . . . except Fritz [Vice President Mondale], Zbig [Brzezinski], Harold [Brown, Secretary of Defense], David [Jones, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff], and Cy [Vance, Secretary of State].<sup>9</sup>

The JCS Chairman, Air Force General David C. Jones, was the key link between the White House and the joint task force charged with the mission, JTF 1-79. General Jones, acting virtually as a unified combatant commander, linked the White House to the JTF commander.<sup>10</sup> The Chairman and his assistant, Lieutenant General John S. Pustay, also linked the President and the rest of the Chiefs. Planning a rescue attempt was initially ill-received.

General Jones . . . disclosed . . . that when the idea of the rescue was originally broached, the Chiefs considered it infeasible. As the planning continued, however, they decided that the problems, which had initially been viewed as insurmountable, were solvable. The Chiefs thus maintained that they had agreed to the presidential proposal only after a long, hard look.<sup>11</sup>

What hasn't been reported is how the Chiefs reacted to the alternatives proposed by the White House. Gary Sick refers to “a campaign of *escalating pressure*, up to and including the mining of Iranian harbors.”<sup>12</sup> While the Joint Chiefs of 1990-91 made it clear that the legacy of Vietnam forced them to reject gradualism in the case of Iraq, such was not the case in 1980. Various punitive measures up to and including mining the Straits of Hormuz and Iranian ports were viewed as integral to the rescue attempt. This part of the plan, apparently developed separately from Eagle Claw, was dropped when President Carter became concerned about the potential for excessive collateral damage.<sup>13</sup>

General Jones quickly formed a planning cell for the rescue mission within the organization of the Joint Chiefs. This planning cell was augmented by two officers from the rescue force flown up from Fort Bragg. (An existing contingency plan was rejected, but its choice of rescue force was incorporated.) On 12 November 1979, JTF 1-79 was formed under Major General James B. Vaught. The *Holloway Report* outlines General Vaught's planning guidance:

A forcible rescue was very much a contingency plan, only to be implemented if all other alternatives failed. . . . On the other hand, a sense of urgency was impressed on [Commander, JTF 1-79] and his staff at the very outset: that an

*immediate operation could be required. . . . All planning and preparation required maximum [operational security] because the sine qua non of the concept was to place the ground rescue force at their final assault position with total surprise. . . . Those overriding and, at times, conflicting realities were central to some of the early decisions regarding the selection of a JTF staff, holding the JCS [contingency plan] in abeyance, and the compartmentalization of various preparatory functions.*<sup>14</sup>

The planning process would be continuous right up to mid-April 1980 when the President was briefed and the deployment of the participants was put into motion. This high-level planning was being done within the organization of the Joint Chiefs at the Pentagon (the Unconventional Warfare Branch of the Special Operations Division). Just how involved were the Chiefs in the operation? This operation was not delegated to any other command; JTF 1-79 worked within the organization of the Joint Chiefs itself and took its orders from the Chairman. Ultimate decisions were made by President Carter, General Jones, and one or two others. Unified commands (European and Pacific Commands) were bypassed; they did not even send representatives to participate in planning and coordination until December. The Joint Task Force was virtually a subset of the organization of the Joint Chiefs; participants couldn't tell them apart.<sup>15</sup>

The planning and the concurrent training climaxed between mid-March and mid-April 1980:

[In mid-March 1980] Brzezinski met with Brown and Jones for what he described as a "very comprehensive review of the rescue plan." He came away convinced that the mission had a reasonable chance to succeed. . . . On 22 March 1980, only one month away from D-Day, in the wooded informal atmosphere of Camp David, Carter received his senior advisors. Present were Vance, Mondale, Brown, [CIA Director Admiral Stansfield] Turner, Jones, [Press Secretary Jody] Powell, Brzezinski, and [Assistant National Security Advisor David] Aaron. After General Jones described in detail how the rescue would be accomplished, Vance, according to his own and Brzezinski's account, advised against any military action, an opinion that Carter tacitly dismissed.<sup>16</sup>

On 15-16 April, [Major General Vaught] conducted a two-day meeting in the Pentagon to review the plan with commanders, affirm command and control matters, evaluate force readiness, review contingencies, and make an overall assessment of mission success should it be executed on 24 April. On 16 April, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the plan. That evening, the President approved the plan.<sup>17</sup>

With presidential approval, the plan began to move. Marine pilots moved to join their helicopters aboard the *Nimitz*; C-130s moved to Masirah; and Delta moved first to Egypt and then on to Masirah. The stage was set.

### ***Recrimination, Blame, and Catalyst***

Americans awoke on 25 April to learn of the President's speech in the wee hours of the morning in which he announced the rescue attempt and accepted personal responsibility for its failure. President Carter had made the only statement he could. He was, after all, the Commander in Chief—he was responsible for Eagle Claw, successful or not. Almost immediately, however, the military (at least elements and individuals), the media, and, indeed, the American people began a search to assign blame.

Admiral Holloway's investigating board took the official look at the failed operation. It identified 23 specific issues to analyze based on concerns the members developed during their inquiry. Several of these issues form the nucleus of the criticism still leveled against the operation, primarily in the areas of command and control and security issues. Colonel James Kyle, the on-scene commander at Desert One, focused in his 1990 book on five fatal flaws (listed here in his order of priority):

- The busted weather forecast
- Poor use of communications equipment and flawed command and control
- Questionable pilot abort decisions
- Absurd tactical restrictions
- Flight planning factors (the sidelight issue)<sup>18</sup>

Several alleged faults seem to recur in the literature, despite their lack of validity. Primary among these allegations are the selection of helicopters and the over-involvement of Washington in the mission's execution. The Navy RH-53D was the *only helicopter available* with the capability to carry out the desired mission. While the Air Force's Pave Low HH-53s would have provided marvelously modern avionics, there were simply too few of them in the inventory. Additionally, they would have provided less payload capacity. Second-guessing here is simply uneducated.<sup>19</sup>

The other great myth of Eagle Claw is the lasting image of the micromanaging Jimmy Carter exercising total control from the White House. None of the participants backs this up. Certainly the rescue attempt was *the*

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national effort of the day—the President wanted to know what was going on, but he was not over-controlling. Gary Sick tells us, “Once the decision was taken to proceed with the mission, [President Carter] left the details in the hands of his military specialists.”<sup>20</sup> In a retrospective a year after the Desert One failure, Benjamin Schemmer of *Armed Forces Journal International* related this story of the final White House planning session on 16 April 1980:

At one point in the briefing . . . Brzezinski asked, “How can we talk to the commander if we need to?” Carter cut the question off abruptly: he told Brzezinski, “We *won't!*” He turned [to the Task Force Commander] and said, “I know you’ll be busy. Your mission comes first. If you *have* time to tell us what’s happening, that would be nice. But don’t feel you have to give us play by play status reports. I will not second guess or interfere.” Carter also emphasized that he would follow the chain of command: the President to the Secretary of Defense to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the Joint Task Force Commander. The Task Force Commander, he said, should not concern himself with *any* other counsel. . . . Carter’s vow not to “interfere” was . . . a striking contrast to his image as a President obsessed with detail—wont, it was said, to micromanage national security issues in particular.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Operational Security and Command and Control***

Eagle Claw’s besetting flaws fell in two areas, operational security and command and control. Let us begin with the former, using as point of departure a subsidiary issue—the lack of a centralized, integrated intelligence task force to support the JTF. The *Holloway Report* felt that an intelligence task force run by the Defense Intelligence Agency would have eased the burden for Major General Vaught and his J-2 (intelligence officer). The board saw the J-2 as overburdened with evaluating intelligence as opposed to interpreting it. This led to faulty reports reaching the operators. In turn, this contributed to some crews overestimating the Iranian radar threat and the JTF as a whole overestimating the Iranian signals intelligence capability. These exaggerated estimations resulted in unnecessarily tight emissions control policies for the rescue force and lower en route altitudes flown by the aircraft (especially the helicopters) than might have been required.<sup>22</sup>

The tendency to overestimate Iranian intelligence and intercept capabilities sprang from the mission’s overriding concern with operational security. Paul Ryan described the situation thus: “The White House priority on maintaining secrecy characterized the operation from the start. Clearly secrecy is vital to a covert raid, but . . . excessive security fatally flawed the mission.”<sup>23</sup> White House operatives felt themselves justified in the concern they demonstrated over security. Indeed, the secrecy vital to the mission’s success was a natural concern of the Pentagon as well. Lieutenant General John Pustay relates that White House leaks at this time were incessant and even at the Pentagon they



were frequent.<sup>24</sup> If security is the sine qua non of special operations and Washington was not secure, how did operational security become an albatross about Eagle Claw's neck?

The shortest answer would be compartmentalization. Compartmentalization, the act of restricting each participant's knowledge to his or her portion of the operation, led some people to have information that simply didn't get passed to the operators who needed it.

The most glaring example concerns data that weather forecasters had gathered on the dust storms (the "haboob") common in Iran. These were quite different from the dust storms encountered in the American desert. Instead of settling as soon as the wind dies down, the fine Iranian dust lingers for hours—often a hundred miles away from the storm that raised it. This was known to mission weather forecasters, and they provided a weather annex for the plan that included the information. But this annex was not provided to the helicopter pilots. The C-130 pilots knew of it, but the crews who would spend the longest in the murk did not. Even worse, the traditional relationship between forecaster and pilot was broken. Intelligence officers briefed the aircrews on weather conditions—the forecasters were in a different compartment.<sup>25</sup>

Security affected the crews' reactions to weather in other ways. Neither weather reconnaissance nor pathfinding aircraft were used to aid the helicopters. Satellites provided an incomplete weather picture to helicopter pilots using visual map-reading as the primary navigational tool. Whether dedicated reconnaissance aircraft or pathfinders would have helped is open to discussion, but a simple radio call from the C-130s that flew through the haboob to get to Desert One ahead of the RH-53Ds would have. Helicopter number 5, the crew that became disoriented in the dust and returned to the *Nimitz*, would not have aborted if the crew had known where the dust ended or that Desert One itself was clear. The radio call wasn't made because a virtually 100-percent radio silence had been ordered by the planners. Ryan reports that "there were technical means to enable the transmission of information to the C-130s and to helicopters en route without likelihood of compromising the mission."<sup>26</sup>

Operational security considerations drove command and control decisions as well. Command and control is, perhaps, the area of greatest concern to analysts of Eagle Claw. We've already addressed a related myth, the "over-controlling White House." Indeed, it was the higher echelons of the chain of command that the *Holloway Report* found "ideal." From the President to Major General Vaught the "wiring diagram" is clean—unusual, but clean. "Further down the operational chain, command relationships were less well defined and not well understood."<sup>27</sup>

The JCS chose to "ad hoc it" when they began planning a rescue attempt. Security was again a driving motive. Changing the operations of



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**An RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter lifts off the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* as the rescue mission to Iran begins in the Indian Ocean on 24 April 1980.**

several regular units would have alerted trained (e.g. Soviet) observers. More than just security led planners away from the existing contingency plan. The ad hoc approach was seen to be quicker to an operational capability. The President wanted a capability to react “the next day.” General Jones routinely established special organizations to speed priority tasks. Further, the existing contingency plan “didn’t seem to be that relevant” to the situation at hand.<sup>28</sup>

The results of the ad hoc organizational approach were many. (“Unfortunately, with all the new people on board, orderly planning did get sidetracked on occasion.”<sup>29</sup>) The most controversy surrounds who ended up where in this organization of many parts. There is even a considerable question as to “who was where when” in the chain of command.<sup>30</sup> Attempts to diagram the chain of command are frustrating. Different observers saw different things. Even when the best opinions are put together, the page is littered with dotted lines of coordination and instances of one unit responding to two lines of command. To further complicate matters, a revised chain of command was put into effect just days before the operation took place. While no explicit evidence exists as to why most of the mid-April changes were made, they seem to formalize existing de facto arrangements.

Statements by the participants deny confusion over who was in charge. Neither Kyle, Beckwith, nor an anonymous C-130 pilot makes any

reference to such problems at Desert One.<sup>31</sup> The *Holloway Report*, however, implies otherwise:

Unhappily, no one had foreseen that deafening noise and swirling dust would make command and communication at Desert One very difficult. None of the key personnel (Kyle, Beckwith, and their deputies) wore any insignia or marks for easy recognition. Thus, when they issued orders to the Marine pilots (who might not have seen them before), there were questions as to their identity. Subsequent testimony confirmed that staff planners were wrong in their belief that personal recognition would be adequate for the operation.<sup>32</sup>

Marine Lieutenant General Charles Pitman, despite his denials of any confusion, paints a picture of training supervision for the helicopters that was anything but clearly defined. While the *Holloway Report* portrays him as being "in charge of the helicopter force," the then-colonel now says, "I was not in charge of the helicopters, I was a liaison for General Jones and Lieutenant General Pustay." He goes on to say that since Air Force Major General Phillip Gast was spending much of his time at Yuma, "I *assumed* the two-star was *probably* in charge."<sup>33</sup>

Helicopter crew selection and performance remain the most controversial element of Eagle Claw's history. The ad hoc nature of the planning was supposed to yield an operational capability quickly. But based on earlier studies and the training conducted by US Air Force HH-53 pilots, the Holloway board concluded, "Teaming carefully selected pilots of all services, with a heavy weight on [USAF Special Operations Forces]/rescue and USMC assault experience, would *most likely have produced the most competent crews at an earlier date.*"<sup>34</sup>

Marine helicopter pilots wouldn't be ready as soon as their Air Force counterparts. This has led observers to assume that interservice rivalry played a major role in the choice of the Marines. Former JCS Chairman David Jones denies this, adamantly asserting that the operations at Desert One had nothing to do with service parochialism. He claims it is an unfair accusation that the various services were trying to get into the act. His former assistant, Lieutenant General Pustay, refutes this somewhat. While he denies any explicit deal-cutting, he admits to an implicit notion that "it would be nice to give everybody a piece of the pie." He emphasized that this in no way interfered with the execution of the mission.<sup>35</sup>

Once the Marine pilots were selected, their training program was crucial to mission success. All those intimate with Eagle Claw emphasize that the long-range, nighttime helicopter mission required developing an entirely new capability for the US military. Of course, all the other units had important roles and capabilities to learn as well. The JTF commander and his deputies had the responsibility to make all this come together. The fuzzy chain of command contributed to a less-than-perfect training program:

Training was planned and conducted on a highly decentralized basis within an informal component command structure that does not appear to have been clearly established. . . . Coordination and supervision were performed in part by two officers who were advisors [Major General Gast and Colonel Pitman] to [Major General Vaught], yet retained responsibilities related to their primary office of assignment outside of JTF.<sup>36</sup>

The senior officers of JTF 1-79 were obligated to ensure that training yielded the operational results desired. Clearly they failed. The failure is not simply attributable to interservice rivalry, but to an inability to understand the mind-sets of the services. In choosing the Marines to participate, the Joint Chiefs and JTF were also choosing, in effect, the operational experience of the Marines. Equipment failures occurred during training. One of these included a blade failure indication (a "BIM" light) just as happened to helicopter 6 en route to Desert One. Many writers, including Colonel Kyle, say the data available indicates helicopter 6 could have completed the mission. Colonel Kyle also questions the decision to abort helicopter 2 after its hydraulic problem. He describes how Navy pilots would have handled some of these problems in ways leading to mission success.<sup>37</sup> In *Best Laid Plans*, David C. Martin and John Walcott point to the gap in knowledge:

What Seiffert had not known was that there had never been a confirmed blade crack in a PH-53. He did not know that because he was a Marine used to flying CH-53s. . . . But after nearly 40,000 flying hours with the RH-53, not one crack has been found. . . . "I'm not going to stand here and tell you had I known that I would have changed the abort criteria," Seiffert said. "I will tell you that had I known I *may* have changed the abort criteria, or I would have recommended to my superiors that *they* change the abort criteria." General Vaught . . . concluded flatly, "We should have said . . . we will not terminate without other indications [of blade failure] such as vibrations."<sup>38</sup>

While criticizing the Marines, Colonel Kyle points out that the key problem lay not with the lead pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Seiffert, but rather within the JTF command structure itself: "The JTF should have appointed one individual as the single authority for directing flight operations."<sup>39</sup> This aviator would have been responsible for making decisions on aborts.

As Lieutenant General Pitman points out, this simply didn't happen. No one questioned the BIM abort during training.<sup>40</sup> No one asked, "What if this happens during the mission?" The Holloway group showed how readily available the information was. To ask "What if . . . ?" is taught to military officers as vital to operational success. To not have investigated mechanical malfunctions is a command and staff failure. When the Marines were signed on to the JTF, so was their experience. They clearly demonstrated during

training how they would apply that experience. Had someone raised the question, a reasoned set of emergency procedures could have emerged.

The command decisions of JTF 1-79 were flawed, not the pilots. Gary Sick puts it very well: "The fact that each of the helicopter crews—acting independently and without radio contact with the mission commanders—chose to proceed despite the virtually impossible flying conditions was a tribute to their courage and determination."<sup>41</sup>

### ***Mission Plan Review***

Ultimately, this leads to the last problem I shall highlight—the lack of an independent review of the mission plan. The Joint Chiefs themselves were the final reviewers of the plan. None of these individuals had specific special operations experience, nor, certainly, could they devote extended periods of time from their busy schedules. An independent review might not have changed anything, but it seems likely it would have at least highlighted how far from the normal way of doing things this plan went.

Prolonged ad hoc arrangements often result in tasking from different sources and can cause confusion at the operating level. These situation arrangements may hinder preparation and can impact on overall cohesion of effort. . . . Basic JCS [contingency plan] methodologies and/or existing unified/specified command procedures make full provisions for compartmentalization. [Operational security] can be, and has been, preserved when appropriate steps are taken. Thus, the entire preparation phase could have been accelerated and overall readiness enhanced.<sup>42</sup>

The ambiguities of Eagle Claw planning were its downfall. The questions that should have been asked were not because of the ad hoc, and thereby confusing, nature of the organization. Eagle Claw failed subtly. None of the individual mistakes made was so vital that one can sit in judgment a decade later and say, "If the JTF (or the JCS or whoever) had only done this right, Desert One wouldn't have happened." But painstaking examination of the plan by experts not involved in preparing the plan would certainly have enhanced prospects for a successful outcome.

### ***The Future***

It is still too early to tell where the reforms embodied in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation will take the US military. In 1963 observers could only begin to see what Robert McNamara was doing with the greater powers of the Secretary of Defense following 1958's reforms. What is already clear is that the failure at Desert One helped to change the way the United States military does business—routinely and when we're at war. The test of the reforms comes in war. One night in 1980 we were at war with Iran and our old system

failed. No one can say for sure that today's system would succeed, or that we would do anything radically different, though more recent successes give grounds for optimism. Desert One became a label for justifying change, change needed even before Eagle Claw. Retired Lieutenant General Pitman, however, injects a sobering note. Pointing out that Eagle Claw itself was the way of the future, he cautions, "I bet you when we go again, there will be no better cohesiveness. These [special operations forces] don't really train together."<sup>43</sup> General Pitman uttered these words on 22 February 1991, five days after the commencement of the air assault phase of Desert Storm.

Colonel James Kyle titled his book about Eagle Claw *The Guts to Try*. Our nation indeed had the guts to try in 1980. The Goldwater-Nichols reformers coupled this spirit with improved operational means. One hopes that in seeking a better defense system we haven't reformed out those guts. The Bible tells us there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for friends. Eight men did that night. Maybe that won't be necessary next time. But regardless, when the mission beckons, we've got to have the system, the soldiers, and the guts to try.

#### NOTES

1. Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985), p. 3.
2. The report was named for retired Chief of Naval Operations Admiral James L. Holloway III, who headed the review group at the behest of the JCS. The declassified report (cited in this paper as *Holloway Report*) was serialized in three issues of *Aviation Week and Space Technology*; 15 September 1980, pp. 61-71; 22 September 1980, pp. 140-44; and 29 September 1980, pp. 84-91. This serialization was used in my research.
3. In reality, the C-130s were three EC-130s whose command and control "capsules" had been replaced by fuel bladders and three MC-130s from the US Air Force's special operations force.
4. The mission is most often referred to simply as "Desert One." The planning for the rescue operation was code-named Rice Bowl; the operational phase carried out by Joint Task Force (JTF) 1-79 in late April 1980 was Eagle Claw.
5. The "Marine" pilots were a mixed force primarily from the Marine Corps, with Navy and Air Force pilots added in. Lieutenant Colonel Seiffert is a Marine.
6. The European-based Special Forces team would simultaneously rescue the Americans being held in Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
7. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 282. Sick was a serving Navy officer assigned to the White House at the time.
8. Ryan, p. 12.
9. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 461.
10. Lieutenant General John S. Pustay (USAF Ret.), interview, 5 February 1991.
11. Ryan, p. 96.
12. Sick, p. 290, emphasis added.
13. Pustay interview, 5 February 1991.
14. *Holloway Report*, p. 69, emphasis added.
15. *Holloway Report*, pp. 68-70, and A Participant, "The Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt: A Pilot's Perspective," US Air Force Air Command and Staff College paper, 1982, p. 25.
16. Ryan, pp. 47-48.
17. *Holloway Report*, p. 69.
18. James Kyle with John Robert Eidson, *The Guts to Try* (New York: Orion Books, 1990) p. 327.
19. *Holloway Report*, p. 143. Colonel Charlie Beckwith, commander of the ground rescue force, indicates he had no problem with the selection of the RH-53 as the helicopter of choice in his book, *Delta Force*, written with Donald Knox (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 216. Authors commending air-refuelable helicopters are similarly mistaken. See Kyle, p. 31.

20. Sick, pp. 300-01.
21. Benjamin F. Schemmer, "Presidential Courage—and the April 1980 Iranian Rescue Mission," *Armed Forces Journal International*, May 1981, p. 61. This account was confirmed in a 5 February 1991 interview with Lieutenant General Pustay who was present at the 16 April briefing. He feels the White House involvement was not excessive in either planning or execution of Eagle Claw. Beckwith cites Carter as the example for other Presidents to follow (*Delta Force*, p. 258). Lieutenant General Charles Pitman (USMC Ret.), in a 22 February 1991 interview, offers another side of the story. There was a plan to carry out the mission with only five helicopters—a plan Delta had practiced. It eliminated some "extra" personnel (drivers, extra door gunners, anti-aircraft Stinger teams, etc.). The President was told the minimum number of helicopters for the planned mission was six; he was not told of the alternate plan. As a result, he accepted Beckwith's recommendation to abort. According to Kyle (p. 291), "Seiffert and Beckwith swear they never heard of such a plan. If this truly was a viable alternative, then we all should have known about it."
22. This is one cause of Kyle's "Absurd Tactics Restrictions." He feels the helicopter pilots remained far too low because of an erroneous piece of intelligence data received. See *The Guts to Try*, pp. 337-38.
23. Ryan, p. 12.
24. Pustay interview, 5 February 1991. The FBI frequently had to include Pentagon officials as witnesses when investigating leaks from National Security Council meetings.
25. *Holloway Report*, p. 144, details the problem of weather information. The report contains repeated references to operational security.
26. Ryan, pp. 75-76. The relationship between these elements and Colonel Kyle's allegations of "poor use of communications equipment" and "questionable pilot abort decisions" is clear. The inability and reluctance to talk to each other severely degraded execution on the night of 24 April. Lieutenant General Pitman said only one or two radio calls from the C-130s would have made a huge difference. Interview, 22 February 1991. Colonel Kyle gives a view of his thought process, and why a radio call was not made, in *The Guts to Try*, pp. 248-52. Throughout the book he describes the various elements of the story—desires for security, lack of practice with SATCOM radios, missing and incompatible encryption systems, etc.
27. *Holloway Report*, p. 91.
28. Lieutenant General Pustay interview, 5 February 1991, and Pitman interview, 22 February 1991. See also Kyle, p. 34.
29. Kyle, p. 57.
30. See *Holloway Report*, pp. 70-71.
31. Kyle, *The Guts to Try*; Beckwith, *Delta Force*; and A Participant, "The Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt: A Pilot's Perspective."
32. Ryan, p. 81.
33. Pitman interview, 22 February 1991, emphasis added. Lieutenant General Pitman stressed his role as liaison and logistics coordinator, while adding that he and Colonel Kyle were given "deputy commander" titles after returning from the mission. He also pointed out that many VIPs visited training sites and offered suggestions, further confusing the command structure.
34. *Holloway Report*, p. 144, emphasis added. Lieutenant General Pitman says he picked the crews based on his belief that they would offer the earliest capability. In hindsight, he would have used Army pilots based on their qualifications with night vision goggles. Interview, 22 February 1991.
35. General David C. Jones (USAF Ret.), interview, 30 January 1991, and Pustay interview 5 February 1991. Lieutenant General Pitman sides with General Jones: "It wasn't a plot to use all the services."
36. *Holloway Report*, p. 140.
37. Kyle, pp. 329-39.
38. David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 34.
39. Kyle, p. 332.
40. Pitman interview, 22 February 1991.
41. Sick, p. 301. Colonel Kyle joins Colonel Beckwith in questioning the determination of the Marines. But if pilot drive and determination were truly missing, not one RH-53D would have made it to Desert One. As a pilot with a great deal of low-level flying time, I have nothing but admiration for the six Marine crews who pulled off their flight through the Iranian haboob. The Holloway board tried to exonerate these men; to continue to focus on them is an injustice.
42. *Holloway Report*, p. 71. Major General Vaught did try to overcome risks by establishing a "murder board" within the JTF. The results of this three-man group included changes and improvements, but Colonel Kyle admits the murder board probably should have come from outside the JTF. See Kyle, p. 142 (notes).
43. Pitman interview, 22 February 1991.