

Combat Search and Rescue

A Longer Look

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*Editorial Abstract: Several other authors in this issue address military casualties in general; in this article Colonel Whitcomb looks at a casualty status unique to combat aviation—that of the downed aircrew. In this sense, casualty aversion relates to our strong desire to rescue our people and our historical practice of doing so. As Whitcomb points out, however, an inverse relationship appears to exist between the level of effort directed toward CSAR and the level of military and political effort/commitment involved in any particular conflict. Important to the issue is recognizing that **CSAR is combat, not just rescue**. Commitment to bring back our people is part of the American soldier's article of faith that willingness to accept risk or to sacrifice is based on two things: (1) such sacrifice is not needless and (2) the nation will make every effort within mission dictates to recover its soldiers from enemy territory. This keeps Americans fighting for each other and our way of life.*

AS THE RECENT events in Serbia indicate, combat search and rescue (CSAR) is still with us. The successful rescues of the pilot of an F-117—known as Vega 31—and of Hammer 34, the pilot of an F-16, make for exciting stories, but little has appeared in print on these two operations. No doubt, this is prudent because operations continue in-theater. But when the stories are eventually told, readers will find much in common with SARs or CSARs from earlier conflicts. These accounts will take



their place in the rich lore of rescue operations, which go back to the beginning of manned flight and honor the men who go in harm's way so "that others may live."

From a historical perspective, these rescues seem to fit into long-term patterns from which we can draw lessons to apply to future operations. Winston Churchill, a great student of history, once said, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see."¹ Aviation history abounds with stories of rescue. Perhaps some of that history

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would prove useful to stimulate discussion or debate to help us take a longer look at the subject. The reason we do this seems obvious. After all, those are our troops out there, and we will try to get them out if they go down. But perhaps the answer is not quite that simple—perhaps there is quite a bit more to this complex issue.

In any military operation, we must be prepared for CSAR for any crew, group, or team that may be isolated behind enemy lines. This means being able to rescue people from a single-seat fighter, an airborne warning and control system aircraft, a special forces team, or myriad other sources. (The three US soldiers not rescued from Serbia during the recent Balkans conflicts were on a routine ground patrol.)

The first and perhaps main point is that *CSARing is war fighting*—pure and simple. We cannot think of it separately. CSARing is just another form of battle. In that vein, the principles of war do apply. There will be a time and place for mass or economy of force and perhaps deception operations, depending on the situation. Unity of command will be essential to focus the effort. Security will be critical because of the need for timely, focused action and the realization that the enemy will try to counter our actions. We must carefully guard critical information and intelligence.

In a theater of operations in which many actions, battles, and perhaps campaigns take place, CSARs will add to the fog and chaos of war. As opposed to other types of operations whose objectives are not clear or easily understood, however, a CSAR's objective is clear, understood by all, and easily measurable. Furthermore, it appeals to us on a human level—perhaps a dangerous trait because it can detract from other efforts. That is, we find it easy to divert resources meant for other battles to a CSAR effort. Are we willing to rescue somebody regardless of the cost? Seemingly, the mantra today is that “the war will stop for CSAR.” Is this prudent?

It goes without saying that CSAR demands absolute precision. In a larger theater of operations with so many other things going on,

we literally have to reach into realms of organized chaos to pluck a specific person or persons out.

Experience shows that when an aircrew is down, time works against us. Our enemies realize that we will make the effort and will try to rescue our personnel. We must assume that they know of our efforts and probably have some knowledge of our specific techniques. A recent test at Nellis AFB, Nevada, suggested that after two hours on the ground, the odds begin to turn against a successful rescue.²

CSARing seems to involve two paths of knowledge. For lack of better terms, the labels *logos* or logic and *pathos* or emotion will suffice. Both have a role in this business.

Logos

Looking at all of this historically, the accomplishment of five things dramatically increases the chances of a successful rescue. Of course, no one can guarantee success because, after all, we are operating in the realm of conflict and chance.

First is the matter of *position*—we have to find the survivor(s). This sounds very basic, but that is the point. It is absolutely fundamental to the whole process. As a recent CSAR report stated, “Accurate coordinates are critical” to recovery³ (remember that the *S* in CSAR stands for *search*). In the old days of Southeast Asia, we used to send in a pack of A-1s to sweep the area to find the survivor(s). Today, with sophisticated radars, guns, and missiles, this is becoming harder to do. We should be prepared to use all available assets, both theater and national, to locate the survivor(s). This is critical because we cannot begin to properly marshal our forces for a recovery until we know their whereabouts. We should also emphasize that we must prevent the enemy from discovering the location of the survivor(s).

Position appears to have value on four levels:

1. *Strategically.* The location of the survivor in relation to national boundaries can have a substantial impact on the rela-



During World War II, airmen were rescued by US Navy submarines.

tionship of nations, rules of engagement, and such matters as the need for overflight privileges. In Southeast Asia, we had different operation rules for South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. We launched no rescue operations for crews lost over China.

2. *Operationally.* We must determine whether the location of the survivor(s) will affect anything else going on in the larger conflict. Will a focused CSAR operation in a particular time and place interfere with some other operation, or can we conceivably use some aspect of that operation to aid the recovery effort?
3. *Tactically.* What do we have to do to get into the immediate area of the survivor(s) to effect the recovery? This requires classic intelligence preparation to understand what we must do to counter enemy attempts to defeat the CSAR effort.
4. *Precision.* What do we have to do to facilitate the actual linkup of the survivor and his recovery vehicle—the most critical event in the entire process? Once we commit the recovery vehicle, it must expeditiously maneuver to and link up with the survivor(s) and then depart the area.

Second, we must establish *communication* with the survivor(s) and those agencies nec-

essary to plan, coordinate, command, and execute the rescue. The Korean War showed us that we needed to equip our downed crews with survival radios.⁴ Preplanning can prove very effective here in determining how disparate units and elements can come together to execute a short-notice CSAR. The air tasking order and special instructions can be very useful in this regard, as well as common terms understood by all. Conversely, code words understood by one element of the CSAR effort but not by others can sow confusion at absolutely the wrong moment. Do we all agree on the meaning of *bingo*? How many fighter guys know what a *spider route* is? How many helicopter drivers know what *magnum* means? Moreover, during the intensity of a CSAR event, we must exclude those who cannot contribute. Useless information or chatter is just communication jamming.

Third, we have to have a recovery vehicle. They do not just happen. We always think of the big rescue helicopters—we call them *Jolly Greens*—as the vehicles, but we must think beyond that. Naval vehicles, ground vehicles, or maybe even a ground team can do the job. It does not matter what patch that vehicle wears. The vehicle is not important—the recovery is.

Fourth, we need to have *smart survivors*. As a recent CSAR report states, “Survivor actions are an integral part of the success or failure of any rescue operation.”⁵ The history of successful rescues resounds with this theme.

Fifth, we must be able to establish around that survivor the necessary level of situational superiority so that we can control events long enough to effect the recovery. One of the lessons learned from the Korean War was that air superiority is critical to the successful operation of a recovery task force.⁶ But the necessary superiority is really three dimensional, for some of the most serious threats today are ground based. This makes CSARs unique, separating them from SARs. The first four points actually apply to just about any rescue operation. But again, in combat the enemy will oppose our actions. We must impose our will. We must control events long enough in

the survivor's area to allow the recovery vehicle to make the recovery and depart. This is battle. This is war fighting. We now turn to several historical examples from which we can learn.

World War II

In February 1944, a carrier task force attacked the Japanese forces at Truk Atoll. During the battle, a Grumman F-6F from the USS *Essex* was shot down. The pilot ditched his aircraft in the lagoon surrounding the islands. The flight leader watched him go down, fixed his position, and saw that he was alive and in his raft. He then called back to the *Essex*, requesting air-sea rescue. Another ship in the task force, the USS *Baltimore*, launched an OS2U-3 Kingfisher amphibious aircraft to recover the pilot. Before the aircraft could arrive, however, the flight leader spotted a Japanese destroyer entering the lagoon, apparently to capture the pilot. He led repeated attacks on the ship, driving it away and maintaining enough situational superiority around the survivor to facilitate his rescue.⁷ This procedure repeated itself two months later but with a twist. As the task force once again pounded Truk, more Navy aircraft went down. In one incident, another Kingfisher, this time from the battleship *North Carolina*, recovered 10 downed airmen. Too heavy to take off with survivors literally camped out on the wing, once again Navy fighters covered the Kingfisher as it taxied out to open water and transferred survivors to a waiting submarine, the USS *Tang*.⁸

Korean War

In June 1951, a pilot ditched his flak-damaged Mustang fighter in the Taedong River, 50 miles northeast of Pyongyang. His flight mates saw him swimming in the river and called for a rescue aircraft. An SA-16 Albatross flown by 1st Lt John Najarian responded and flew to their position. The covering Mustangs, joined by other flights, suppressed the enemy guns along both shores as Najarian landed in the cold waters and picked up the

pilot. But the sun had gone down, and the current swept the Albatross toward high-power lines across the river. To help Najarian see the wires, the Mustang pilots turned on their landing lights and flew just above him as he made his takeoff under the wires.⁹

Vietnam War

A number of stories about Southeast Asia deserve telling, one of them being Oyster 01 Bravo. In May 1972, an F-4 was shot down northwest of Hanoi. The weapon system operator (WSO), 1st Lt Roger Locher, evaded the enemy for 23 days before he established communication with friendly forces, who positively located him. Rescue forces in the theater responded, but enemy forces initially drove them off. Gen John Vogt, commander of Seventh Air Force, directed that the entire next day's effort be dedicated to establishing enough local superiority to support the rescue operation. Those efforts proved successful.¹⁰

Bat 21 Bravo/Nail 38 Bravo, a huge SAR, the largest of the war, took place in April 1972. Our forces established communications with the survivors and easily located them. Although we had rescue forces available, we could not establish local superiority so that a rescue helicopter could recover them. Indeed, the enemy shot down several in the effort. A small ground team, using stealth and very precise fire support, recovered the two men.¹¹

An unsuccessful recovery, Owl 14 Bravo, is nevertheless instructive. Another F-4 went down over North Vietnam in May 1972, just north of the demilitarized zone. Only one survivor (Capt Ray Bean, the WSO) made radio contact with covering forces, who located him. Rescue assets were available, but thick enemy antiaircraft forces covered the area. Before we could suppress them enough for a helicopter to enter the area, the enemy captured Bean, releasing him from Hanoi a year later. Captain Bean said that the enemy forces were so heavy that they would have destroyed any helicopter entering the area.¹²

Gulf War

On 21 January 1991, an Iraqi missile downed Slate 46, an F-14. We established intermittent radio contact with the pilot but had only general knowledge of his position. The enemy captured the radio-intercept officer. An MH-53 piloted by Capt Tom Trask proceeded deep into Iraq. In the general vicinity of the survivor, a flight of two A-10s joined the helicopter. They managed to locate the survivor and vector the helicopter crew to him. But enemy troops were in the area, including some trucks obviously homing in on the pilot's radio transmissions. Capt Paul Johnson, the lead A-10 pilot, attacked the enemy forces and vehicles—only 150 meters away from the Navy pilot—and facilitated his recovery.¹³

Balkans War

Also useful is knowledge of the failed recovery of Ebro 33, a French Mirage crew shot down in late August of 1995 during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Operation Deliberate Force. We never established radio contact with the survivors and never determined their location. Although we had rescue forces available and possibly had sufficient force to establish enough local superiority, we never recovered them; in fact, friendly forces were injured in the search efforts.¹⁴

Pathos

We now turn to pathos, the emotional "why" of all this. Again, the answer seems obvious. The survivor is one of ours, and we never leave our people behind.

But don't combat aviators accept the risk of loss and death in battle? Don't they get extra flight pay to accept the risk? As one US Air Force general said in 1972, at the height of the Bat 21 Bravo SAR, "As airmen or soldiers or sailors, we should expect that there are times when as one person, we must be sacrificed for the overall [mission]."¹⁵

Yes, we do accept the risk but have never easily accepted the view that our people are easily expendable—especially in a war we do not seem intent on winning. So, why so much for one man? Several reasons come to mind.

First is *human nature*. Rescue stories are some of our most heroic. People always come forward to help those in distress. The fact that the enemy contests CSARs only causes us to redouble our efforts.¹⁶

Second is the fact that *we can*. We have developed the hardware to recover anybody from just about anywhere. Additionally, we do not hesitate to use any technology if it benefits the process. We have also learned how to organize our forces to achieve the necessary level of situational superiority for our rescue forces to operate.¹⁷ For *Joint Vision 2010* junkies, we call that dominant maneuver and precision engagement.

Third, rescue operations involve a *morale factor* for our troops, something Gen Hap Arnold noted in World War II. He directed the initial establishment of rescue forces to recover downed airmen, as had the British and Germans.¹⁸ Part of his thinking was, in fact, pragmatic, for it takes an incredible number of resources to produce trained crew members.¹⁹ This is not to say that in humanistic terms, they are more valuable than other Americans—just that they are harder to replace. Gen Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addressed this recently when he said, "By pledging to put every effort into recovering our highly trained [personnel], we send a powerful signal about their importance and help sustain their spirit under the stress of combat."²⁰

Fourth, rescuing our people denies the enemy a valuable resource. Intelligence and propaganda value are the obvious issues here. Consider Mogadishu or the shootdown of Capt Scott O'Grady by the Bosnian Serbs.²¹ During the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein tried to exploit captured aircrews. No doubt, he will do so again if we lose any personnel in Operation Northern or Southern Watch.

Finally, a covenant or bond binds the brotherhood of airmen. Again, General



Specialized recovery vehicles such as this SB-17 aided in saving downed aircrews.

Arnold noted that aircrews performed their missions more efficiently with the expectation that if they went down, we would make every effort to rescue them.²²

Ground warriors call this bond unit cohesion, noting that, over time, soldiers must believe in what they do and must believe that the cause they fight for is worth the sacrifice. If not, they will fight for each other. Stephen Ambrose has eloquently documented this phenomenon among American fighting men in World War II.²³

Our covenant is not so much unit specific as it is specific to the breed—the breed of airmen. It is the common thread stretching from the beginning of flight to the recent rescues in Serbia. What is that bond? It is simple: if at all possible, we will not leave our downed fellows behind without making an attempt to get them out.

This does not mean that we are unrealistic about war. Airmen understand, accept, and expect that we will take losses. But we do not give up those losses lightly. We expect that whatever we are asked to do is worth the sacrifice—that we will not be wasted for some specious task or mission and that our troops “shall not have died in vain,” as President Lincoln said at Gettysburg.

But I would suggest that our propensity to prosecute CSAR missions exists on a sliding scale inversely proportional to the level of effort we are willing to expend in any conflict. In other words, in a total conflict in which national existence is at stake, we will pay any price. I clearly remember as an A-10 pilot in the 1980s listening to a NATO general telling us that he would “litter the west bank of the Elbe River with A-10s to keep the Warsaw Pact forces from crossing.” I was horrified by his pronouncement until I thought through what that statement meant. Such an event would have been a total conflict, and the survival of our nation would have been at stake. The intensity of operations would have forced such sacrifices upon us. Our nation has accepted such losses in time of crisis, such as the Civil War or World War II. But in limited conflicts, we will be prepared to pay only a limited price. Why?

I am reminded of the old saw that military forces do not fight wars—nations do. And they fight for political objectives. Carl von Clausewitz explained all this many years ago when he said, “The political object is a goal, war is a means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation of the purpose.”²⁴ But that goal or objective determines

the war's value, against which the public assesses the costs of the war in determining its support for the war. The public measures these costs in terms of taxes and, more importantly, risks to the lives of its sons and daughters. Again, Clausewitz explained this by saying, "Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the political object, the object must be renounced."²⁵

In a total conflict, then, CSARs will be limited—but not so in limited engagements, in which we prepare ourselves to pay only a limited price to achieve a limited objective. Today, it seems that airpower is the weapon of choice for doing so. Indeed, our political leaders evidently feel—based on what they hear from their constituents—that the public has little tolerance for loss. The fact that aircrews are now about the only ones put at risk puts a real premium on CSAR, accentuating the covenant. I saw this happen firsthand as a young lieutenant in Southeast Asia.

About 1969, my nation had begun to turn against the war. The object, whatever it was, was not worth the price. America wanted to withdraw. President Nixon called it "peace with honor." But I clearly remember hearing my squadron commander say to us, "There is nothing over here worth an American life—except another American."²⁶ That gave us cause for reflection, considering the fact that we were fighting alongside our allies.

By 1972, after eight years of war, we were still fighting there without any real dedication to a cause—except withdrawal. Like warriors from earlier wars, we fought for each other. We kept that article of faith that if we went down, the Jolly would come for us. In fact, the rescue helicopter became the symbol of that bond or covenant. To the rescue crews, it was a call sign. To the rest of us, it was a prayer. To many, it was salvation. It was the bond.

Now, we airmen have not been too good about recording these feelings. But consider the words of a US Navy PT boat sailor who explored this subject in a different way. When discussing a failed attempt to recover buddies lost in a night battle, he said, "The gain in going back is in the message it sends. Even if

you're seen to disappear in a ball of flame, your friends will come back looking for you."²⁷

Again, General Shelton recently accentuated this determination when he said, "This bond among warriors promises not to leave a comrade behind on the battlefield, a promise that extends to a shipmate at sea or a wingman who gets hit deep behind enemy lines."²⁸

But there is danger here. We must not do this at the expense of our ground forces. We must perform rescue operations as part of the larger battle and must do so in proportion. Where does the line break? I don't know. Again, Churchill gives us a useful vector. In 1940 the German armies overran the countries of Western Europe, driving the British army back into an enclave at the French port of Dunkerque. The Royal Navy and individual British seamen in their private boats rallied to bring a large portion of that force safely back to Great Britain—without equipment or organization. After a spring of constant bad news and humiliation, the British people celebrated this event as a major victory. But Churchill stood in Parliament to remind them that "we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of victory. Wars are not won by evacuations."²⁹ One can also argue that they are not won by CSARs. But the ability and propensity to execute CSARs are key to the aircrew morale, *especially* if they are the only ones at risk. General Vogt understood this when he sent that large task force up near Hanoi to rescue Roger Locher in 1972.

We must never rescue our people at the expense of our allies. In coalition warfare, the relationship between allies is a center of gravity that a skillful enemy can exploit. Hitler tried to do this to the grand coalition in World War II. The North Vietnamese were very skillful in driving a wedge between us Americans and our South Vietnamese allies. We must make sure that we are willing to do CSAR for all our allies—as we did for Ebro 33.

So that is the pathos. These are powerful forces, and we are occasionally reminded of them in small but very significant ways. In No-

vember 1997, several hundred of us gathered at Arlington National Cemetery to bury the crew of Jolly Green 67, the men lost in the Bat 21 Bravo rescue effort in 1972. It was a beautiful, memorable day. One could not help noticing all the veterans of that era who gathered to welcome home the crew. Indeed, the blue suits of the highly decorated vets covered the site and part of an adjoining hill. Two MH-53 helicopters, descendants of the Jolly Greens, made a magnificent flyby. Lt Gen Dave Vesely, representing the chief of staff of the Air Force, said, "All of us who have flown in harm's way know what a difference it makes to believe that every effort will be made to rescue us if we are down. . . . Today while we count the high cost, we should also count ourselves fortunate to be the beneficiaries of these, the best of men—men who gave their lives so 'that others may live.'"³⁰

As the ceremony ended, many of the now aged veterans of those times, missions, and battles went up to the coffin. Some laid their



In June 1951, an SA-16 made a dramatic rescue in North Korea.

maroon berets on it or placed roses or stickers. Some saluted or just touched it. In all of that there was a message. Those still proud veterans had come for the Jolly because they remembered a time when, if necessary, the Jolly would have come for them.

That is the covenant, the bond that binds this brotherhood of airmen. It is palpable, and, as we saw again in Serbia, it is timeless. □

Notes

1. James C. Humes, *Churchill: Speaker of the Century* (New York: Scarborough Books, 1982), 269.
2. This data comes from the Joint CSAR Joint Test and Evaluation recently completed at Nellis AFB, Nevada.
3. Joint Services S.E.R.E. Agency, *F-16 Lessons Learned: Introduction*, 3 December 1999, 17. (Secret) Information extracted is unclassified.
4. Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950–1953* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 583.
5. *F-16 Lessons Learned*, 14. (Secret) Information extracted is unclassified.
6. Futrell, 583.
7. Robert J. Cressman, "Rescue from Truk Lagoon," *The Hook*, Winter 1993, 24.
8. Battleship *North Carolina*: Kingfisher Truk Rescue, 30 April 1944; on-line, Internet, 16 March 2000, available from http://www.battleshipnc.com/kingfisher_truk_rescue.htm.
9. Futrell, 578–79.
10. Jeffrey Ethell and Alfred Price, "Man on the Run," *Air Power History*, Fall 1989, 45.
11. See Darrel Whitcomb, *The Rescue of Bat 21* (Annapolis, Md.: US Naval Institute Press, 1998).
12. *Ibid.*, 152.
13. Lt Col Tom Trask, interviewed by author, 17 February 2000.
14. Adm Leighton Smith, press conference, Naples, Italy, 22 September 1995; on-line, Internet, 4 January 2000, available from <http://www.hri.org/news/misc/misc-news/95-09-22.misc.html>.
15. Earl Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia: 1961–1975* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 119.
16. Joint Publication 3-50.21, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Combat Search and Rescue*, 23 March 1998, I-1.
17. *Ibid.*, II-12.
18. Tilford, 5–7.
19. John Warden, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988), 49.
20. Gen Hugh Shelton, remarks at the Department of Defense Personnel Recovery Conference, Fort Belvoir, Va., 27 October 1999; on-line, Internet, 3 November 1999, available from <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/#NewsArticles>.
21. Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1.6, *Combat Search and Rescue*, 30 September 1998, 4.
22. Tilford, 3.
23. See, for example, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
24. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.
25. *Ibid.*, 92.
26. Whitcomb, 142.
27. Dick Keresey, "Farthest Forward," *American Heritage*, July/August 1998, 60.
28. Shelton remarks.
29. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (New York: Time Inc., 1950), 72.
30. "Jolly Green Funeral Ceremony," Headquarters United States Air Force TV Center, 11th Communications Squadron, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 25 November 1997.