

Mission to Dong Ha - Mission to Al Hammar©

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“[It] was just a natural thing that when anyone had trouble, if you were in the area, and you had the capability, you just responded. . . . There were no questions asked.”

Captain Mike Rosebeary, Blueghost 28

It is now almost etched in stone – the belief and reality that when Americans are shot down or trapped in enemy territory, others will try to rescue them. Our military history resounds with examples of such heroic efforts. Unfortunately, not all were successful, and from the failures, perhaps pungent lessons can be learned.

It was the Spring of 1972. After a long and divisive war, American forces were leaving Vietnam. Most ground units were gone. Those remaining, were mostly aerial units of the Air Force, Navy, and Army. They were covering our retreat and supporting the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN).

Sensing an opportunity, North Vietnam unleashed a massive invasion on the 30th of March. Whole infantry divisions, reinforced with armor, engineer, and air defense units, invaded South Vietnam at three points. The first attack took place through the demilitarized zone and focused on capturing the cities of Dong Ha, Quang Tri, and Hue.

Initially stunned by the attacks, the ARVN units began to stiffen and fight back. In support, US Air Force and Navy units began launching massive airstrikes. Forward air controllers (FACs), flying O-2 and OV-10s, swarmed above the enemy units and devastated them with almost unlimited air power.

Below, helicopters of U.S. Army cavalry troops flew direct support for the beleaguered defenders. Their scouts sought out the enemy. Their gunships added to the carnage being wreaked on the enemy forces.

Adding to the onslaught were the B-52s of the Strategic Air Command. They rained bombs by the hundreds on the invading forces.

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) commanders anticipated the American effort and increased their air defense forces to support the attack. The advancing forces were

defended by radar controlled SA-2 missiles, and thousands of guns of every caliber. The NVA labeled this umbrella of steel the “meatgrinder.”

On the 2nd of April, as the ground battle around Dong Ha was approaching a critical point, a flight of three B-52s flew west of the town to bomb an advancing enemy unit. To protect the bombers from the SA-2 missiles, the flight was escorted by two EB-66s which could jam the enemy guidance radars. But as they approached the target area, they were attacked by a barrage of 12 enemy missiles. Despite the bubble of electronic jamming being emitted by the aircraft, one missile broke through and slammed into one of the EB-66s.

The missile ripped the aircraft apart. Of the crew of six, only one man, the navigator, Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton, ejected.

Flying just a few miles to the south, an Air Force FAC in an O-2, First Lieutenant Bill Jankowski, spotted Hambleton’s parachute. He watched him descend and land and was horrified to realize that Hambleton was down in the midst of the raging battle below. He was surrounded by 30,000 enemy troops a few kilometers west of Dong Ha.

Air Force rescue forces were on alert at Da Nang Airbase. But that was seventy miles away, and time was of the essence. Jankowski knew that sometimes the best plan was to get whatever helicopter and air escort assets were available in the area to come in and attempt an immediate recovery before the enemy could respond to a downed crew. The pilots called it a “quick snatch.” So he came up on the “Guard” emergency frequency and called for any support available to rendezvous with him for the effort.

Two Air Force A-1s, led by Captain Don Morse, responded to the call. Jankowski told them to rendezvous with him near Hambleton’s position. When they did, he quickly gave them a situation briefing and then proceeded to fly south to see if he could find some helicopters for a quick pick up. The two A-1s began attacking enemy units and guns in the area.

Jankowski’s calls for emergency support were monitored by a US Army helicopter flying near Hue. Its call sign was Blueghost 39. It was a UH-1H “Huey” from F Troop of the 8th Cavalry. Normally based near Da Nang, at Marble Mountain Airfield, it was one of several unit aircraft, which had been assigned missions in the Hue - Quang Tri area that day.

On board as passengers were Captain Thomas White, the Troop operations officer, and Stu Kellerman, a reporter for United Press International. Earlier in the day, Blueghost 39 had taken Kellerman on an aerial tour of the Dong Ha area to get a

firsthand view of the unfolding battle. While returning, they were instructed to swing by Hue/Phu Bai and pick up Captain White for the return home to Marble Mountain. At Hue/Phu Bai, the copilot, Warrant Officer Guy Laughlin, changed aircraft with Warrant Officer John Frink, the copilot on another unit Huey, Blueghost 30. They swapped because Frink had already spent several days up at Hue/Phu Bai, and was scheduled to return to home base for a few days off. Blueghost 39 was his ride back.

The emergency call changed all of that. Captain White briefly considered having the helicopter turn north and immediately proceed to Cam Lo. But he could not risk the life of the reporter. So he directed the crew to drop him and Kellerman off back at the Hue/Phu Bai tactical operations center. Using their radios, Captain White could then monitor the events. While unloading, he directed the helicopter crew to proceed to the Hue/Phu Bai Airfield, refuel, and be ready for immediate tasking.

In the refueling pits, they were joined by two F Troop AH-1 Cobra gunships, call signs Blueghost 28 and 24. Earlier in the day, the two had been working out of the Quang Tri Airfield a few miles east when it came under heavy NVA artillery fire. They scrambled off literally to save themselves and their aircraft and proceeded to Hue/Phu Bai for safety.

Another unit Huey was also there. Its call sign was Blueghost 30, and was flown by Warrant Officer Ben Nielsen. Nielsen had no specific tasking, but was on call for whatever might develop.

Based on what little he knew about the shot down aircraft or the developing land battle, Captain White directed Captain Mike Rosebeary in Blueghost 28 to immediately lift off with the other gunship, Blueghost 24, flown by Warrant Officer George Ezell, and one of the Hueys, Blueghost 39, and respond to the emergency call. Rosebeary acknowledged the call and took off with his three helicopters. White then called Rosebeary and instructed him to contact the Air Force FAC (Jankowski) to coordinate the rescue. He also informed him that the enemy forces were plentiful and well-armed, and directed him not to take his flight north of the Dong Ha River without fighter support.

Five minutes later, Captain White decided to augment the flight with the other Huey, and directed Blueghost 30 to take off and join the others in the effort. Nielsen had been monitoring the radio calls, and was becoming concerned. He knew the area well and began calling on the radio for Blueghost 39 not to cross the river. His calls were not acknowledged.

Captain White then called Rosebeary and informed him that the second Huey was being launched. Rosebeary directed his second Cobra, Blueghost 24, Warrant Officer Ezell, to drop back and join up with the second Huey.

Proceeding north, Rosebeary and his team checked in with Jankowski. The FAC gave them a cursory situation briefing and instructed them to proceed up to Dong Ha, cross the river, and proceed west to the survivor who was located near where the river made a big bend back to the east. Rosebeary acknowledged the information, but further queried the FAC on the threat. Jankowski told them that there were many guns in the area, but that A-1s were already hitting them. Satisfied, Rosebeary committed his two lead helicopters to the attempt.

Blueghost 28 and 39 proceeded into the area at low altitude. The UH-1 was out front at 50 feet above the ground. Blueghost 28 was at 300 feet, about 3,000 feet behind, in proper position to deliver rocket and machine gun fire against anything which might shoot at them. But as they passed Dong Ha and crossed to the north side of the river, both helicopters began to take heavy ground fire. Blueghost 28 responded with rockets and 40mm fire. But the ground fire was coming from everywhere, and immediately began scoring against both helicopters. Captain Rosebeary was thrown off balance. He could hear and feel the rounds slamming into his aircraft. Some shattered his canopy. Others ripped at the vital components of his machine. Critical systems began to fail; warning lights illuminated the cockpit. Rosebeary's trusty Cobra was being rapidly converted into a piece of torn wreckage.

He could see that Blueghost 39 was taking hits. Rosebeary called for the two of them to turn and leave the area. The crew of Blueghost 39 did not respond verbally, but Rosebeary could see that the aircraft was beginning to turn. Then the Huey began to smoke from the engine area, and Rosebeary watched it cross behind a tree line and set down in a controlled landing.

The crew of Blueghost 39, consisting of pilots First Lieutenant Byron Kulland and Warrant Officer John Frink, crewchief Specialist Five Ronald Paschall and gunner Specialist Five Jose Astorga, was down behind enemy lines and in serious trouble. During the run in, they had also seen all of the muzzle flashes. Kulland began a descent in an attempt to use the terrain and trees for protective cover. The gunner Specialist Five Astorga, called out ground fire to him and began returning fire against the overwhelming force. But his gun jammed and he was hit in the leg and chest.

He passed out momentarily and came to when the helicopter lurched to a stop on the ground. He quickly unstrapped and crawled to the cockpit to check on the other three. One pilot and Paschall were conscious. Somebody threw Astorga a survival vest, and he began to crawl away from the chopper.

But he realized that he was alone so he decided to turn back to make an effort to pull out the rest of the crew. Then someone yelled “VC!” and he could see enemy troops closing in. They were firing their weapons at the helicopter. It exploded in a violent fireball. The other three crewmembers, still onboard, were killed. The wave of heat from the explosion swept over Astorga, and he renewed his efforts to crawl away. Immediately, he was set upon by NVA troops and captured. He began his long journey north to Hanoi.

But Captain Rosebeary did not know this as he struggled to keep his ripped and shattered helicopter in the air and escape to the south. Fortunately, his main radio still worked. As he egressed, he called a warning to the other two choppers not to cross the river. He also made his own Mayday call, announcing that he was badly damaged and heading southeast to escape. As he set down, another helicopter landed nearby and rescued him and his gunner.

For the next four days, rescue forces from all services struggled to get to Hambleton. Several aircraft were damaged and shot down in the attempt. The loss of personnel also mounted: eight more flyers were killed and another taken prisoner before commanders in Saigon forbade any more helicopter rescue attempts. The message was obvious: pick-up rescues along a fully developed battle line were just too dangerous for helicopters.

But Hambleton was not written off. A small team of Vietnamese Navy commandos led by US Marine Lieutenant Colonel Andy Anderson and a US Navy SEAL, was dispatched to the area. Over the next several days, they were able to work their way through the battle. Then, the SEAL, Lieutenant Tom Norris, and Vietnamese Commando Nguyen van Kiet penetrated enemy lines to rescue Hambleton and another airman who had been shot down in the massive effort.¹

This mission was the exception. Most rescues in the long war in Southeast Asia were accomplished with helicopters. The numbers were staggering. One history claimed that Air Force rescue units made 3,883 recoveries during the war.² Amongst the Air Force, Navy, and Marine fighter and bomber crews, the legend took hold that if they went down, the rescue helicopters would be there. It became an article of faith.

The men who flew those helicopters remembered a different lesson. They remembered the debacles like Lam Son 719, Bat 21, and Mayaguez and realized that on modern battlefields, there were places when helicopters could not venture.³

Ten months later, Jose Astorga was released by the North Vietnamese along with all the other POWs. The bodies of Byron Kulland, John Frink and Ron Paschall were

recovered and returned to the United States in 1995. They would not be forgotten, especially by one young Lieutenant who would fly helicopters in a later war.

Does history repeat itself?
It is a timeless question.

It was late February, 1991. US and coalition forces had gone to war in the Middle East to force the army of Saddam Hussein, the despotic leader of Iraq, to abandon its bloody and devastating occupation of Kuwait. After a devastating strategic air campaign of five weeks, massive ground forces had attacked into Iraq and Kuwait. They were supported from above by unremitting air support as the joint and combined forces systematically destroyed the army of Iraq. By February 27th the battle was coming to a head. The heavy armored formations of the VII and XVIII Corps had attacked deep into Iraq, wheeled to the east, and were driving parallel to and just south of a muddy lake called Al Hammar toward the Iraqi town of Al Basra. The combat was bitter and the formations of the Iraqi Republican Guard fought back. Their units were well equipped with the latest in anti-aircraft defenses and they made every effort to defend themselves from the onslaught of the allied aircraft. Since the beginning of the war, they had shot down 25 allied aircraft in the Kuwaiti area.

As the battle raged south of Al Hammar, a flight of four F-16s from the 10th TFS of the 363rd TFW was launched to provide close air support (CAS) for the advancing US Army forces. Their call signs were Mutt 41, 42, 43, and 44. They were not immediately needed and diverted to an orbiting air control aircraft for a target. A controller onboard instructed them to hit fleeing Iraqi units along the Basra road.

About 15 miles away, Captain Scott Fitzsimmons, a forward air controller (FAC) flying an OA-10, had arrived in his assigned area. His call sign was Nail 51. He said that, "The weather was real bad. I went in and talked to Warmonger – the ASOC of the VII Corps. They pushed me forward to an Alpha [holding/contact] point. I talked to the [1st Armored] Division ALO. He gave me a tasking ... and pushed me forward to Chowder 21 who was the ALO for the 2nd Brigade."⁴

Breaking out below the weather at about 3,000 feet, the young pilot could see a line of M-1 tanks and M-2 Bradley fighting vehicles. It was several miles long, running north to south, and all of them were slowly moving east. He could see that they were firing, and in front of them were burning Iraqi tanks, personnel carriers, and trucks. He could see that some of the Iraqi T-72 tanks were firing in return but that their shots were bouncing off the M-1s.

The visibility was about 3 miles with rain showers. The Brigade ALO directed him to attack a tank position several kilometers in front of the M-1s. Fitzsimmons

rendezvoused with a flight of two A-10s. They were carrying Maverick missiles. He marked the target for them with a smoke rocket. When the ground FAC with the lead battalion confirmed that he had marked enemy tanks, he cleared his A-10s to attack them. The two A-10s made several passes and destroyed the designated vehicles with their missiles and 30 mm cannons. As they finished, they were low on gas and had to depart for home.⁵

High above and a few miles to the north, the flight of 4 F-16s arrived over the assigned coordinates. The flight lead, Captain Bill Andrews, (Mutt 41) flying his 35th combat mission, split his flight and took his number two man down below the clouds and smoke to look for targets. Scanning through the smoke and haze, Andrews did not see anything that appeared lucrative. As he added power to climb back above the clouds, his aircraft was wracked by a violent explosion. Andrews saw warning lights illuminate all around the cockpit. He could see a bright yellow glow in his rear view mirror and knew that his aircraft was on fire. As it pitched over and started to dive at the ground, he ejected.⁶

Descending in his parachute, Andrews took out his emergency radio and made several panicked calls as he descended through the smoke of the raging battle below.

Captain Fitzsimmons heard him loud and clear. He remembered:

“I stuck my nose up and responded. I didn’t know how close Andrews was. I could hear him well on the radio.... Somebody came on the radio and gave a bullseye call, ‘Randolph 200 degrees’ for whatever it was. I whipped out my smart pack and found Randolph, punched in the coordinates in the INS [inertial navigation system] and according to the INS, I was pretty close. So I just started heading north thinking that I could help him out. What I did not know was that the line of tanks that I was working over only extended about 3 or 4 miles to the north. He was about 12 miles north. As the tanks moved east ... I don’t know if they were securing their flank or what, but as I went more than about 4 miles north, I was back in enemy territory, but I did not know it... I was at about 2-500 to 3,000 feet.”

“I got hold of him [Andrews]. He was in his chute, near ‘the factory,’ which was an F-16 geo-reference point. It was unknown to me. He said that he was coming down just northwest of the factory.”⁷

Hanging in his parachute, Andrews winced as large caliber rounds from the numerous anti-aircraft guns flew past him. As he neared the ground, that firing stopped, only to be replaced by the whizzing of bullets.

Andrews hit the ground hard and broke his right leg. He released his parachute and watched several Iraqi soldiers run towards him. Several were firing their AK-47s. He laid down his radio and raised his hands. They stopped firing. Like Gene Hambleton, 19 years earlier, Andrews was down in the midst of one of the largest battles of the war, just south the Al Hammar and west of Al Basra.

When the soldiers were about 30 feet away, Andrews saw a surface to air missile (SAM) being fired behind them. It was tracking on the OA-10 flown by Fitzsimmons. He quickly grabbed his radio and called for the OA-10 pilot to break and drop flares.

Above, Fitzsimmons instinctively reacted. He remembered of Andrews, "He made a radio call, 'BREAK, ZSUs, MISSILES!' I heard that so I just pushed on the stick and almost instantaneously, this wall of fire goes over my canopy, I am guessing from the ZSU. And then I started hammering on the flares and he made some kind of 'BREAK LEFT, FLARES, FLARES' call. He kept hollering on the radio. . . . And when I looked back two infra-red SAMS had exploded behind me, biting off on the flares."⁸

The maneuver worked.

When the soldiers saw what Andrews had done, they began firing at him and charged. He dropped the radio and again raised his hands. They shot his radio to pieces and then did the same to his helmet, raft, and other assorted equipment. They then stripped him of the rest of his gear, threw him in the back of a pick up truck and took him to a headquarters.⁹

Reacting as trained, and unaware of the events below, Fitzsimmons started the process of notification. He reported Andrews' loss and a quick situation report to AWACS, the orbiting control aircraft in the area, who forwarded the information to the tactical air control center (TACC) back in Riyadh. Then, low on gas, Captain Fitzsimmons had to head home.

Fitzsimmons had been able to note Andrew's general location. Understanding the overall tactical situation he remembered that, "I could not pull off a CSAR that fast. Even if I had been able to get my eyes on where he was, I do not think that there was anything that I could have done – we could have had a hundred airplanes and I am not sure we could have done anything. [A rescue effort] was probably not a good idea, especially since he was captured and they - I am sure that I told the AWACS as I was heading out that I was pretty sure that they [Iraqis] had got him because he was off the radio."¹⁰

Another OA-10 FAC in the area, Captain Gerry Stophel recorded the entire event on a small cassette tape recorder he carried in his cockpit.¹¹

The notification of Andrews' downing came in from AWACS to the TACC and was quickly brought back to the Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC) which was located in the TACC. Plotting the survivor's location, the director, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Hampton, could immediately see that the survivor was beyond the forward line of troops (FLOT). The JRCC intelligence cell also quickly looked at the situation. They could see that the survivor was down in an extremely dangerous location.¹²

Following established procedure, he assigned the recovery to the forces of Special Operations Command, Central (SOCCENT). Historically the U. S. Air Force provided the bulk of rescue forces in any contingency. But due to a series of reorganizations and ongoing unit transitions to new helicopters, the Air Force did not deploy any rescue forces to Desert Storm. In this conflict, each service was expected to provide for its own needs with the forces of SOCCENT performing recoveries across the FLOT or deep in enemy territory. Equipped with helicopters of several varieties, including the MH-53 "PaveLows," direct descendents of the Jolly Greens in Vietnam, they were well equipped for the mission. Additionally, several of their more senior members had flown combat rescue in Southeast Asia and knew what helicopters could and could not do in combat.¹³

Word of the downing of the F-16 in the midst of the ground battle rippled through the TACC. Major Lornie Palmgren, a SOCCENT liaison officer working the day shift there, remembered hearing about it. Noting Andrews' position on the map, he walked over to the JRCC intelligence cell. Scanning the locations of all the Republican Guard units in his immediate vicinity, he recalled that, "It took me about 30 seconds to make a decision."

He said to Joe Hampton and the director of the TACC, Colonel Al Doman, "We're not sending two crews out there. That is a high threat area. That is absolutely ridiculous. Let's not do this... we can't handle it. It was daytime. If it had been a nighttime thing we might have taken another look at it."¹⁴

At SOCCENT, the intelligence officer on duty, Captain Jim Blackwood, took the call. He and his enlisted assistant quickly plotted the downed airman's location on the SOCCENT threat board. Like the officers in the JRCC, they could immediately see that he was down in the midst of the Al Faw Republican Guard division and quickly came to the conclusion that any attempted helicopter rescue in daytime would be far too risky.

The commander of SOCCENT, Colonel Jesse Johnson, and his senior airman, Colonel George Gray, were both in the SOCCENT command center when the call came in. Captain Blackwood briefed them on the situation. Colonel Gray remembered the scene:

“I was sitting there in the room with Jesse Johnson and we’re looking at the Intel picture along with our intel people and we said, ‘Oh-oh! This is bad news. We’re not going to do this. There is just no way.’ It wasn’t a unilateral decision. That was a joint decision among all of us. ‘We’re not doing that. As much as we hate it we just can’t go in there. . . . We’d really like to get that guy, but it was just going to be bad news.’”¹⁵

Collectively, they came to the conclusion that:

The risk of losing a rescue helicopter was much too high.

The probability of rescuing the young captain, especially in daylight, was too low.

Perhaps a night effort was a possibility. They refused the mission in daylight and so notified Lieutenant Colonel Hampton.¹⁶

Hampton took the call in the JRCC. The refusal led to a heated discussion between several JRCC personnel. Upset with the decision by SOCCENT, several questioned it since helicopters had launched just a few hours prior for Magic 14, a U.S. Marine AV-8, that had gone down about 30 miles southeast of Andrews’ location. One young Air Force officer went over to talk to a senior ranking Air Force officer in the TACC. The senior officer followed the younger man back to the JRCC area and overheard the conversation.¹⁷

As one who had been shot down and rescued himself in Southeast Asia, the senior officer understood the importance of rescue and was not happy with the answer. But there were several problems on going at the time. A larger one had to do with the rapid movement of the massive Army units and the senior officer had been closely monitoring their movement as their units swept towards Basra.

The fast advance of the massive Army units dictated the constant changing of the fire support coordination line (FSCL). This control measure was designed to deconflict the operations of ground and air units. The constant movement of the line eastward as the Army VII and XVIII Corps pressed forward was directly impacting the efforts of the allied aerial forces to attack the fleeing Iraqi forces.¹⁸

The XVIII Corps had been augmented with a strong force of attack helicopters. It was pushing its lead Division, the 101st Air Assault Division to launch its AH-64 Cobras against the same Iraqi units. To do so, they needed to use the same airspace as the Air Force, Navy, and Marine flights above. To deconflict this and prevent fratricide, the

FSCL had to be properly placed. Captain Bill Andrews was down in the middle of this mess.

To deal with this issue, the senior Air Force officer had been working directly with the Army battlefield coordination element (BCE) in the TACC. After receiving the news about Mutt 41 and the refusal of SOCCENT to launch a helicopter, he walked over to the BCE. He pointed to Andrew's position on the map. Hampton remembered what happened then:

“[The senior Air Force officer] said, ‘You got any choppers up there? Why don’t you pick the guy up?’ And so they launched an Army chopper.... I [Hampton] was in the back of the room, and one of the guys said, ‘Hey, you had better go up and find out what is going on. I think we have got something happening.’ I went up there [to the BCE] and [the senior Air Force officer] told me what he did. [He said], ‘I talked to the Army guys. Is there any way to recall them?’ I [Hampton] said no.”¹⁹

Efforts to recover Andrews were also being made by others. When word of the loss of Mutt 41 came into the operations center at the airbase at King Khalid Military City (KKMC), some of the F-16 guys remembered the successful effort which had been made 10 days prior for another F-16 pilot by Army pilots and, on their own, decided to try that approach again. A few went across the field to visit the U.S. Army flyers of the 3rd Battalion of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). One of the Army pilots, CW2 Steve Rogers remembers what happened:

“They came across the field with the ISOPREP (individual identification information for Captain Andrews) info and said ‘You have to go get our buddy.’ Lieutenant Colonel Daily, the 3rd /160th commander said, ‘Hey I know how you feel, but I can’t launch on what you are doing here. We will send it up and see what happens. ‘This information then got passed up to [SOCCENT]. They turned around and said ‘Hey, that is good information. ‘ They then called us back and told us to start planning to go recover him. So we started planning a night mission. Our call sign was Asp. We planned a two-ship mission. I sat down at the threat board with the S-2 [intelligence officer] and he seemed to be very well versed in the threat. We drew a straight line from our location to where he was and realized that there was just no way. We had to cross the ground battle. There was just so much air defense stuff going directly to him or even just trying to scoot around. It was just going to be impossible. So I just said that the only way to do this is to go out over the water . . . turn around and come in from the north. We had the fuel to do it that way.”²⁰

Back in the TACC, the Army controllers in the BCE called the “order” from the senior Air Force officer forward to the XVIII Corps. There the commander, Lieutenant General Luck, was skeptical of its viability and wanted as much information on it as possible before committing to the mission. He was unaware that the mission was already being called forward to the aviation brigade of the 101st Division.

At the time, the 101st had several aviation battalions forward at a location called objective “Tim” which had been seized by the 3rd Brigade of the Division just a few hours prior. “Tim” had been turned into a forward operating base for the aviation elements and was now called “Viper.” Here, the attack battalions were refueling, rearming, and launching to attack Iraqi units fleeing north towards Basra. The situation was chaotic and the attack crews were being launched out with minimum intelligence or clear objective other than to attack and destroy targets of opportunity.²¹

Hearing that XVIII Corp assets were going to attempt a rescue, Colonel Gray at SOCCENT called down to the 3rd /160th and told those guys to “turn off their efforts” because the regular Army units were going to try and get him.²²

One of the first battalions into Viper was the 1st battalion of the 101st Aviation Regiment (1/101) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dick Cody. Arriving there, its companies were immediately assigned missions. Captain Doug Gabram, the B Company commander, was ordered to take his Apaches and attack to the northeast along the causeway over a large bog called Al Hammar. He was in the target area when he heard Andrews’ emergency calls. The calls were somewhat garbled. Reacting instinctively, he quickly checked his flight to determine that none of his aircraft was down. He then tried to determine Andrews’ location based on what was being said to the FAC, Nail 51. But when the survivor stopped talking on the radio, Gabram felt that it was just too risky to fly east to search for him.²³

Another of the battalions that went into Viper was the second battalion of the 229th Aviation Regiment (2/229). A separate unit originally located at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, it had traditionally been a training/conversion unit for newly assigned Apache pilots. But as DESERT SHIELD had grown, it was brought up to wartime equipment and personnel levels and deployed to the Gulf. There, it was assigned to the XVIII Corps and attached to the 101st. It was equipped with 18 AH-64 Apaches and 3 UH-60 Blackhawks and had within it some of the most experienced Apache and Blackhawk pilots in the Army. Several had logged extensive combat time in Vietnam. One of them was the commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Bryan.

When his lead elements flew into Viper, Bryan met with the Brigadier General Hugh Shelton, assistant division commander of the 101st, and the 101st Aviation Brigade

commander, Colonel Garrett. As his helicopters were being refueled and rearmed, Bryan received his instructions. Little intelligence was available. As to his unit's mission, he was told to "fly due north, hit the Euphrates River, fly east along the river until you hit the causeway." There, the 2/229 was to attack fleeing Iraqi vehicles in a designated engagement area called "Thomas." Bryan was urged to move quickly since it appeared that the war would soon end, and his commanders wanted to destroy as many Iraqi forces as possible before any ceasefire.²⁴

With his mission guidance, Bryan directed his three attack companies to sequentially strike along the Causeway. He would lead the effort with C Company. B Company with the unit operations officer, Major Mike Rusho and his assistant, Captain Dave Maxwell in one of the other UH-60s, would be second, and A Company would be third. Briefing complete, Bryan's commanders saluted and proceeded to carry out their missions.²⁵

The Apaches that Bryan's crews flew were specifically designed to destroy enemy armor. The Blackhawks were assigned to the unit for utility support. As the Apaches were striking the enemy units, the Blackhawks were moving unit equipment forward to Viper. Additionally, they were also launching behind the Apaches for possible intra-unit rescue duty.

The "order" to rescue Andrews was passed down through the 101st Division and to Colonel Garrett at the Aviation Brigade.²⁶ Initially, he offered the mission to Lieutenant Colonel Cody and his battalion of Apaches. Cody quickly looked at the map. Realizing where the survivor was, he concluded that the mission was far too dangerous and recommended that nobody fly in there.²⁷ Colonel Garrett also knew that the 2/229 was at Viper. He called for the commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan but was told that he, his operations officer, and assistant were out flying missions. The operations officer, Major Rusho, had left another young assistant, First Lieutenant Al Flood, behind to organize the rearming and refuelling operations and to push the gunships forward. Flood had just arrived in another Blackhawk that was being flown by CW4 Philip Garvey and CW3 Robert Godfrey. Their callsign was Bengal 15. They dropped him off and repositioned to the refueling pit to take on gas.

Lieutenant Flood remembered what happened:

"I heard someone call me on the radio and it was the [aviation] brigade TOC[tactical operations center]. They were trying to contact our elements forward but could not, so the brigade TOC contacted me, asked where I was."

“I said, ‘I’m about 200 meters south.’ He said, ‘Roger, come over to the brigade TOC, I need to talk to you.’ So I ... walked over there. I talked to the Brigade commander [Colonel Garrett] and that’s where he briefed me on the situation.”

“In a nutshell, what he told me was that we had a situation up north, we were receiving reports of an F-16 pilot who had been shot down over Republican Guard units that were near where my battalion elements were in contact with them. He asked me what we had here in the rear, i.e. at FOB Viper. I told him we had one company which was A Company, 2nd/229th that was at redcon 3, ready to launch within 30 minutes. We had some OH-58s.”

“Then he said, ‘Do you have any CSAR assets back here?’

“I said, ‘We have Bengal 15 on the ground. He just came out of hot refuel. ’”

“He said, ‘Really?’”

“I said, Yes sir”

“He said, ‘I tell you what. Go get the crew and tell them to talk to me. I need to talk to them about this.’”²⁸

Lieutenant Flood ran to get the two pilots of Bengal 15.” ‘Hey guys, you just got out of hot gas, right?’

“They said, ‘Yes, we just got out.’

“I said, ‘Listen. Brigade commander needs to talk with you. We have a CSAR mission.’

“They said, ‘OK.’ So they walked over to the brigade TAC and he [Colonel Garrett] briefed them on what was going on up north. What he asked them was ‘Can you guys go and get him?’ Well, the obvious answer was ‘Hell, yeah!’ They were the best UH-60 pilots that we had in the battalion. That was our mission---for the UH-60s inside 2nd/229th, command and control, aerial re-supply and rescue.

“About 5 or 10 minutes later, they were walking back towards the aircraft, and I asked Garvey and Godfrey what was up.

“They said, ‘Well, got an F-16 guy and he’s been shot down over Guard units. We’re going to go up there and get him.’

“I said, ‘Okay. What else?’

“Garvey said, ‘What we want to do is we’re going to get 2 of the AH-64s to give us an escort up there.’

“ I said, ‘With the A Company guys, right?’

“They basically said, ‘Yeah.’

“What I did then was I said, ‘Okay. You guys are going to crank right now, right?’

“They said, ‘Yes. We’re heading there now.’

“I said, ‘I will contact A Company and let them know what the plan is and I will also tell them to contact you as soon as they get up to Redcon 1 so you can give them the details of the mission. Then you can launch off together.’

“I also knew that part of the plan was once they got up farther to the north, closer to where the actual shutdown had been, that the plan was that they were going to contact AWACS on guard and the AWACS would vector them in. They explained that to me as well but we were in a rush to try to get the mission off as fast as possible so I didn’t pick their brains for every single detail. Bottom line was they had a mission, I knew the basic plan of it, then I contacted A Company on my FM radio.”²⁹

The pilots of Bengal 15 prepared to take off. They had received only a generic intelligence briefing on the general situation and no specific information on the particular area into which they would be flying. They had tactical maps of that section of the theater, but they had not been updated on the constantly changing battle situation.³⁰ In the quick discussion with Colonel Garrett, he had also instructed them to contact their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan as soon as they got airborne.³¹

The Apaches belonged to A company of the unit and were being led by the company commander, Captain Mike Thome. Garvey quickly contacted Thome on the radio. Thome agreed to cancel his assigned deep strike mission and provide escort for the CSAR effort. He and Garvey rapidly put together a plan of action. The battalion had an intra-unit CSAR plan if an Apache went down. But a rescue mission for someone not in the unit was unrehearsed, and it needed some thought.³²

Colonel Garrett had also told Garvey that the downed airman was wounded. To handle that, Garvey asked that the unit flight surgeon, Major Rhonda Cornum, go with them. She had earlier ridden in with them to Viper and was nearby. Moments later, three Army pathfinders for site security arrived to accompany them.³³

When everybody was ready, Bengal 15 flight lifted off. Garvey contacted AWACS and the controllers began giving them vectors to the survivor's location. The crew did not contact the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan, who had been listening to the F-16 pilot as he descended in his parachute. Bryan had a unit plan for such pickups and could have rendezvoused with them for a larger effort.

While these preparatory events were taking place at Viper, up in the skies over Andrew's position, AWACS started diverting strike flights for the CSAR. One of the first was a flight four F-16s also from the 10th TFS. It was led by Captain Mark Hebein. Checking in, the FAC, Nail 51, asked him to go down below the clouds and see if he could find the survivor or at least find his wreckage.

Mark was carrying a load of CBU-87. He left his flight above the clouds and dropped down for a look. He described what he saw:

“I left my flight orbiting above. . . I said okay,. . . I will make one more pass, this time, I will go down from east to west and then swing around out of the sun because it was just setting. I . . . broke out at about 3500-4000 feet. Immediately, I could see the crash site and burning wreckage, about a mile south of me. I said, ‘He is somewhere between there and the road,’ so I started swinging around and as I looked back I had a couple of SAMs coming at me. Probably SA-16s. . . . so I rolled out and as I did, I saw immediately all around me red fire-hoses, ZSU 23-4 within 50 feet on all sides. I thought, ‘Jeez, I am just toast.’ So I threw it into afterburner and pulled back as hard as I could and closed my eyes because I just knew that I was going to get blown out of the sky. . . . About this time they [AWACS controllers] are asking me, ‘Were you able to see him because we got the helicopter going in,’ and I said, ‘No, the area is way too hot. Do not send a helicopter in right now.’ I tried to tell them that about three times and it was broken on the [secure] radio and I said the area was way too hot for any SAR right now. Do not head into that area, because I know with all that stuff coming up a helicopter would be toast. And they acknowledged it.”³⁴

Nail 51 was low on gas and passed the on-scene-command to Pointer 75, an F-16. Holding above the clouds, pointer continued to coordinate to get strike flights in to hit the guns and SAMs. Two USMC F-18s from VMFA 314 checked in with Pointer. Initially fragged for an interdiction mission, they, like so many others, were immediately diverted for CSAR support whenever they occurred. Eager to help, the two Marine pilots, Captain “Otis” Day, and his wingman, Captain Paul Demers, set up for the strike as Pointer 75 gave them a cursory briefing on the situation as he knew it and the intense enemy anti-aircraft threat.

The weather had worsened. Thunderstorms had popped up and were right over the area. The two F-18s were at 25,000 feet. The FAC was above them at 30,000 feet. Captain Day asked him for a more detailed briefing on the situation. The FAC could not provide one because he had not been down below the clouds. He gave them the coordinates that he had for the survivor. Captain Day was aware of the threat. His intelligence officer had briefed them before the flight. Additionally, his radar warning receiver was barking at him constantly as new SAM sites tried to track their aircraft.

Captain Day took his flight down below the weather. They broke out into the “clear” at about 8,000 feet. “Clear” though, was a relative term. In actuality, the visibility below the clouds was abysmal because of the oil fires and burning wreckage. As they cleared the clouds, the enemy gunners and SAM site operators spotted and took them under constant fire. After frantically searching, Captain Day found what he thought was the wreckage. Pointer 75 told him that AWACS had said that a helicopter would be approaching from the west for a rescue attempt. Captain Day decided to attack anything that they could find extending west from the target area. Both men then dropped their CBU's and bombs on several targets. This was done without any apparent coordination with the elements of the 24th Infantry Division which were just west of the survivor's location and were, in fact, being over-flown by Bengal 15. With their ordnance expended and now critically short on fuel, the two F-18s departed the area. Captain Day checked out with Pointer. He also informed him that the area was much too hot for a rescue attempt and recommended that they not try it.³⁵

Back below the clouds the flight of helicopters headed for the pilot. The Blackhawk was faster and moved into the lead. The Apache pilots had their aircraft at maximum power but steadily fell behind. They used the turns to close on the Blackhawk.

AWACS initially took the flight north. With no coordination, they were taken through the sector of the 24th Infantry Division. They overflew its lead unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 7th, a mechanized infantry unit which was in contact with enemy forces. The visibility was poor because of all the oil fires and burning enemy vehicles.

The AWACS controllers turned them east to approach the survivor's location. As they neared the enemy lines, the flight began to take fire from enemy positions. Just then, the AWACS controller told them that they were “entering a red zone,” and several larger caliber weapons firing green tracers opened up on them. One of the Blackhawk pilots called, “Taking fire! Nine o'clock! Taking fire!” Simultaneously, several rounds slammed into Bengal 15. That was immediately followed by a plaintive call from the stricken helicopter, “Don't put the rotor in the ground. Don't put the rotor in the ground, Phil! “ The mortally wounded aircraft pitched forward and crashed into an earthen berm. Landing nose first, the aircraft dug in to the soft sand and flipped over.

Five on board were killed in the explosion. Within moments, Iraqi soldiers were upon the surviving three who were now prisoners.³⁶

Killed: CWO4 Philip
Garvey

CWO3 Robert
Godfrey

SFC

William Butts

SGT Roger Brelinski

SSG Patbouvier

Ortiz

Captured: MAJ
Rhonda Cornum

SSG Daniel Stamaris

SP4 Troy Dunlap

The enemy guns also found the Apaches. One of them was also hit with damage to the left engine nacelle and fuselage. Captain Thome watched the Blackhawk roll up in flames.³⁷

Reviewing the situation quickly, Thome determined that the chance of survival was low and the risk to the Apaches and crews was too great, so he ordered the two aircraft out of the area.³⁸

The “rescue” had failed.

As word of the failure was passed along, SOCCENT called the 3rd /160th and told them to again prepare for a night effort. CW2 Steve Rogers and his crew went back to work. Then they got another call. Rogers remembered, “Then they called us again and told us that it was a no go that the area was just too hot. No way that they would approve a launch. So we shut down. Then we heard what had happened to them. Everything they had run into, we had plotted. That was the sad part. This crew had flown into the unknown. They gave them a mission and they had launched and flew right into bad guys and I just know that their threat map was just not as updated as ours. We had the best threat intel in the theater.”³⁹

Working their way through the growing thunderstorms, USMC pilots Captain “Otis” Day and Captain Paul Demers landed at the nearest airfield for gas only to then learn that their efforts had been for naught, that the survivor had been captured and an Army helicopter had been shot down.⁴⁰

Likewise, Captain Mark Hebein and his flight recovered at KKMC only to discover the same thing. Captain Hebein remembered the moment:

“I got back and debriefed and that’s when I found out that a helicopter went in just a few minutes after that and had got shot down. I was so pissed off because I had told them specifically. I was right there, and the area was way too hot to send a helicopter in, especially unescorted.... I am so pissed off that they sent a helicopter in there after I told them not to.”⁴¹

Most shocked of all was the commander of the 2/229, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Bryan. He remembered the loss of Bengal 15 clearly:

“As far as a Blackhawk going down, my plan was to go get the back-up Blackhawk and go after the first... My experience from [Vietnam] had molded my feelings that you need to think long and hard about sending 4,5,6,7 or more people to rescue someone who is possibly mortally injured, captured or dead. That may sound cold-blooded but at some point, someone has to say ‘no more. ‘I was prepared to make that decision if I had to. That is some of the unwritten stuff that commanders get paid to do – but not necessarily trained.

“Had I been there when this mission came up, the first thing I would have done would to insist on knowing something about the ground situation. That information was non-existent because of the ‘rout.’ But what WAS known was that the Iraqis had shot down an F-16, the pilot had ejected and was talking on his radio going down. . . and the Iraqis were shooting at him in his chute. Knowing these facts (or lack of them) would have led me to conclude that the pilot had either survived and was now a POW or he was dead - murdered by Iraqi cowards who shot him before he hit the ground or shortly thereafter.

“For me the next decision would have been easy. I would not put another 3-4 aircraft and 10-15 of America’s sons and daughters at risk! Some would scoff at that but I remain firmly convinced that that rationale was valid then and is valid today.

“CSAR is like any other military mission. It takes planning, coordination, and resources. Because we are dealing with life and death here and extreme urgency, many overlook the planning, coordination and resource requirement.”⁴²

In the JRCC, Major John Steube shared the same thought when he remembered that, “People just wanted to get this guy. They stopped thinking about what the consequences were for the people who had to go in there. It cost a bunch of people their lives.”⁴³

The next day, a task force from the 2/7th Infantry Battalion from the 24th Infantry Division moved forward and secured the Bengal 15 crash site. They found the remains of the five killed soldiers and indications that the rest of the troops had been taken prisoner. Later that day, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Bryan of the 2nd/229th Battalion was able to fly into the site and help recover the bodies of his men.⁴⁴ A week later, the POWs were returned to American control.

The debacle of Bengal 15 was a replay of the mission of Blueghost 39. For the best of reasons, both crews were sent into the fury of major force-on-force battles to rescue airmen downed in the midst of maelstrom. In both cases, the results were the same. There seems to be a common message here. When Americans are down or isolated in harm’s way, their countrymen will always be willing to come for them. But regardless of the best of intentions, there are places in this world where helicopters cannot go. The words of Lieutenant Colonel Bill Bryan are sage. And they possess an authenticity which cannot be challenged. For not only was he the commander of the 2nd/229th during Desert Storm, in 1972, he had been that young helicopter pilot in F Troop of the 8th Cavalry when Blueghost 39 was lost. For him, history had repeated itself.

May both crews of soldiers rest in eternal peace.

Notes

1. Darrel Whitcomb, *The Rescue of Bat 21*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1998, page 32 – 37. Original footnotes are included in that document.
2. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975*, Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, Washington, DC, 1980, page 155.
3. Ibid.
4. Interview with Captain Scott Fitzsimmons, February 28, 2002. Note: all ranks indicated in interviews are as of Desert Storm.
5. Ibid.

6. Captain William F. Andrews Oral History Interview, US Air Force Academy, CO, September 25, 1991.

7. Fitzsimmons interview.

8. Ibid.

9. Captain Bill Andrews – US Air Force Academy Oral history. Note: Captain Bill Andrews was awarded the Air Force Cross for his actions that day.

10. Fitzsimmons interview.

11. Interview with Captain Gerry Stophel, February 21, 2002. Stophel recorded this mission. His tape provided the basis for Andrew's award.

12. Interview with Captain John Steube, January 9, 2002.

13. Hampton interview. OPERATION DESERT SHIELD COMBAT SEARCH AND RESCUE PLAN, USCENTCOM/JRCC, November 1, 1990, Gray interview.

14. Interview with Major Lornie Palmgren, May 2, 1991

15. Interview with Colonel George Gray, May 3, 2001.

16. Gray interview, emails between the author and Jim Blackwood on February 25 and March 14, 2002.

17. Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Joe Hampton, March 12, 2000, Steube interview.

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28. Interview with First Lieutenant Al Flood, January 15, 2001. Email from Al Flood to the author on April 22, 2002.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Email from Bill Bryan to author, March 12, 2002.
32. Interview with Captain Mike Thome, July 14, 2000.
33. Interview with Major Rhonda Cornum February 20, 2001
34. Interview with Captain Mark Hebein , July 25, 2001.
35. Jay Stout, *Hornets Over Kuwait*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1997, page 219 – 223, *History, 3rd MAW*, USMC Historical Center, Washington, DC, page 166.
36. Bradin, page 211.
37. Thome interview.
38. Ibid.
39. Rogers interview.
40. Stout, page 219 – 223, *History 3rd MAW*, page 166.
41. Hebein interview.

42. Email from Bill Bryan to author, March 12, 2002.

43. Steube interview.

44. Phone conversation with Colonel (ret) Chuck Ware, January 21, 2002.