

Team Sport, Combat Search and Rescue over Serbia, 1999





Darrel D. Whitcomb & Forrest L. Marion

(Overleaf) Special Forces personnel performing CSAR duty for combat operations over Serbia. (Photo sources are individually indicated.)

AIR OPERATIONS PLANNERS CALCULATED ON A VERY SHORT CAMPAIGN

In the 1990s, United States military forces, as part of the great NATO Alliance, were involved in the Balkans region of Europe, primarily against the forces of Serbia. The last part of that conflict involved direct action against Serbia itself as NATO attempted to staunch their atrocities directed at the southern region of Kosovo. The Serbians had long-considered Kosovo as part of their nation. In 1389 at the Battle of Kosovo Polje, according to Serbian culture, Serbia saved Europe from the Ottomans by “sacrificing itself to halt the Turks in Kosovo.” Serbia’s gaining of independence in 1878 rekindled its desire for control of Kosovo. As a U.S. Air Force study noted, to Serbian nationalists, “Kosovo was an intrinsic part of Serbia.” Under Marshal Josip Broz Tito’s rule following World War II, Kosovo enjoyed a degree of autonomy while under Serbia’s control. But in the post-Tito 1980s, ethnic Albanians in Kosovo—comprising 90 percent of the population—appeared to threaten Serbian aspirations for control of the province. Playing upon Serbian nationalism and fears, Slobodan Milosevic rose to the presidency in Serbia in part upon his promises of retaining control of “ancestral” Kosovo. In 1989, Milosevic withdrew Kosovar autonomy and permitted the removal of Kosovar Albanians from government jobs including the police. By 1991–92 as the former Yugoslavia disintegrated, Kosovar Albanians formed a shadow government. Still, the province remained relatively peaceful.¹

In the spring of 1998, however, Kosovo began to unravel. In March, Yugoslavian—essentially, Serbian—security forces initiated attacks against insurgents of the independence-minded Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The violence increased, including the forced evacuation of Kosovar villages and the murders of ethnic Albanians. Nevertheless, by summer the KLA controlled about one-third of Kosovo. Serbia responded with a major offensive. Meanwhile, fearful of what appeared to be the start of another round of ethnic cleansing—as occurred in Bosnia several years earlier—NATO defense ministers considered military options against Serbia. In mid-October 1998, the NATO Council authorized air strikes against Serbia which, for the time being, persuaded Milosevic to comply with a UN-directed cease-fire and the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo.²

Although Milosevic did, in fact, withdraw a sizeable number of his security forces from Kosovo, the cease-fire was short-lived due to violations on both sides. By early 1999, Serbian forces returned to

Kosovo. Reports of human rights abuses against ethnic Albanians increased, including evidence of a massacre, in January, of Kosovar civilians at Racak, Kosovo. Meanwhile, thousands of Kosovar refugees, driven from their homes and villages in what appeared to be a systematic campaign by the Serbians, began crossing the borders into neighboring Albania and Macedonia. In February and March 1999, last-ditch diplomatic efforts at Rambouillet and Paris, respectively, failed to secure a return to the October 1998 agreement or an end to Serbian operations in Kosovo. On March 20, Serbian forces renewed an offensive against the KLA and continued ridding Kosovo of ethnic Albanians. Three days later, the Secretary General of NATO, Dr. Javier Solana, directed the start of air operations against Serbia. The NATO operational name was ALLIED FORCE (OAF); the U.S. component, NOBLE ANVIL (NA).³

Air operations planners calculated on a very short campaign. In fact, U.S./NATO leaders anticipated that only two or three nights of limited air strikes would convince Milosevic to change his rogue-like behavior. As the campaign began, the forces of U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), had only fifty-one fixed targets approved. He forbade any form of ground attack, instead directing USAF Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, the commander of Allied Forces Southern Europe, to conduct an air campaign utilizing the almost 550 U.S. and 650 allied combat and support aircraft assigned to strike the designated targets.⁴

The air planners were also concerned about the possibility of allied aircraft being shot down. They recalled how several NATO aircraft had been shot down in earlier Balkans operations. On April 16, 1994, a British Sea Harrier aircraft was downed by an SA-7 missile near Gorazde, Bosnia.⁵ A year later, on June 2, 1995, a Serbian SA-6 brought down a USAF F-16 pilot, Scott O’Grady, over western Bosnia.⁶ Both the British and American pilots were rescued. On August 30, 1995, near the town of Pale, Bosnian Serbs employing a surface-to-air missile scored against a French Mirage 2000K, call sign “Ebro-33.” U.S. aircraft flew ninety-two dedicated sorties in support of recovery efforts for Ebro-33 until officials confirmed that the Serbians had captured the two-man crew. The crews’ release later served as a stepping stone toward the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995.⁷

All U.S. forces in OAF were organized as Joint Task Force (JTF)-NA. As expected, SOCEUR would

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SEVERAL OF THE USAF CREW MEMBERS OBJECTED TO HAVING THE “EXTRA” TROOPS ON BOARD

provide supporting special forces. Its commander, U.S. Army Brigadier General Eldon Bargewell, activated JSOTF - NOBLE ANVIL to do so. Under it, the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)-2 headquarters element at Brindisi was assigned to specifically provide combat search and rescue (CSAR) capability. The Air Force Special Operations Command’s (AFSOC) 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) reinforced its element there to four MH-53Js and crews. The 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field, FL, was directed to deploy augmenting forces. Capt. Jim Cardoso was serving as the B Flight commander and deployed his flight with five MH-53Js, crews, and support personnel for the operations, as requested by the 21st SOS so that it could have a standardized fleet and intermix crews. However, as the Airmen and aircraft were en route, AFSOC ordered them to return the aircraft to Hurlburt for replacement with five MH-53Ms, which had just been modified with upgraded navigational and threat alert systems. They were joined by four MH-60s and crews from the 55th SOS as part of the larger Task Force Helo, commanded by the 21st SOS commander, Lt. Col. Paul Harmon.⁸

AFSOC assets at the base also included MC-130P Combat Shadow (tanker), and AC-130H (gunship) aircraft as well as Special Tactics (ST) combat controllers and pararescuemen (PJs)—highly-trained members of the small Air Force spe-

cial operations community that expected to perform their jobs on the ground, often in denied or hostile areas.⁹

AFSOC also increased the ST elements. Under the leadership of Maj. Terry “Eugene” Willett and his successor, Maj. William “Bill” Sherman, the 321 Special Tactics Squadron (STS), based at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom, was “spun-up” no less than three times in anticipation of contingency operations in response to Serbian actions in Kosovo. The third time, however, in March 1999, was the real deal. Later, Lt. Col. Bradley Thompson—a captain in 1999—recalled he was tasked initially with forming three CSAR teams, totaling about ten personnel. By the time the air campaign against Serbia began, however, he was the mission commander for some seventy personnel, including operators who deployed to the JSOTF2 from Special Tactics and Air Rescue units at Hurlburt Field and Patrick AFB, FL, Portland International Airport, OR, and Moody AFB, GA. It was one of the largest concentrations of deployed Special Tactics operators (even though some personnel were under the conventional Rescue organization) in one location prior to September 11, 2001.¹⁰

General Bargewell took a proprietary interest in the rescue mission and closely watched the preparation at JSOTF2. Harmon briefed him on the options that his team had scripted. Bargewell knew that the Serbians expected the allied force to mount recovery operations for any downed aircrews and wanted his Airmen to have the best possible chance for success and survival. He did not want the Pave Lows operating singly or even in two-ship formations. Instead, he accepted a three-ship mini-task-force option consisting of two MH-53s—one MH-53M and one MH-53J—and an MH-60G. The MH-53s would lead and provide fire support, while the MH-60 would be the designated recovery aircraft. A rescue mission commander (RMC) would be aboard the lead Pave Low. This individual would be someone seasoned—such as Lt. Col. Steve Laushine, the 55th SOS commander, or Lt. Col. Tom Trask, the 20th SOS operations officer—who would be in charge and empowered to make whatever tactical decisions needed to execute the recovery. All helicopters would have an ST element aboard for the actual pickup. Additionally, Bargewell ordered a U.S. Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) unit to be dispersed on board the helicopters. The ODA element would be available as another tactical option if, for some reason, it made sense to land the team members and have them execute some form of initial overland recovery.¹¹

Several of the USAF crew members objected to having the “extra” troops on board, arguing that it forced the helicopters to fly with less fuel and placed more lives at risk. They took their concerns to Lt. Col. Harmon. He addressed the issue with Bargewell who “in no uncertain terms” made it clear to the helicopter crews that this was the way the missions were going to be organized. He dictated very specific considerations and criteria for their deployment and use. When that was cleared up, the

The Vega-31 rescue crew. (Left to right) Capt. Matt Glover, Capt. Chad Franks, TSgt. Joe Kirsch and SSgt. Shawn Swift (Source: Col. Chad Franks)



aircrews, ST elements, and ODA assumed alert posture at Brindisi.¹²

Combat operations would begin on March 24. Colonel Harmon worked with Capt. Jim Slife also from the 21st SOS to build five helicopter packages, each led by a very experienced flight lead: from the 20th, Capt. Jim Cardoso and Capt. Paul Pereira, and from the 21st, Capt. Jim Breck, Maj. Lou Caporicci, and Capt. Jim Slife. Every 24 hours, two teams would be on alert as primary and secondary. They would rotate through the schedule with primary, secondary, and local duties. The primary would move forward to Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, reducing reaction time over Serbia, and the secondary would sit alert at Brindisi and respond to calls in Kosovo. Since two models of Pave Lows were on site, whatever type the lead crew flew would lead. The two squadrons did not intermix their personnel. Captain Cardoso agreed with this plan. He had now flown both the MH-53J and M models and knew that the newer M models were more technologically advanced. However, he also believed that the theater experience of the 21st SOS guys was clearly a mitigating factor, later stating that “having theater experience outweighs the machine.”¹³

Vega 31

On the night of March 27, a 20th SOS crew, including Captain Cardoso as flight lead for the rescue package and copilot Capt. John Glass, took off in an MH-53M. Their call sign was Moccasin 60. One wingman, Moccasin 61, was an MH-53J from the 21st SOS, flown by Capt. Shawn Cameron with copilot Capt. Matt Daley and crew. The other wingman was Gator 07, an MH-60G from the 55th SOS, commanded by Capt. Chad Franks with copilot Capt. Matt Glover and crew. Colonel Laushine was aboard Moccasin 60 as the RMC. As directed, an ODA package from the 1st Battalion, 10th SFG, as well as USAF special tactics personnel were dispersed among the three aircraft.¹⁴

As the flight of three helicopters proceeded to

Tuzla, the crews checked in with the NATO AWACS on station and overseeing the strikes that evening. The weather over the region was poor, with mixed rain showers and low visibility, and many strikes had been cancelled. Cardoso and his group landed at Tuzla and taxied to the refueling pits to fill their tanks. As they were doing so, the crews aboard Moccasin 61 and Gator 07 heard a Mayday call on the UHF “Guard” (military aircraft emergency) frequency.¹⁵

Immediately, Laushine and the aircraft commanders went into the Tuzla command center to determine what was going on. There they were told that an F-117 had gone down in Serbia. They quickly began to formulate a recovery plan and tasked intelligence for the most accurate location of the pilot, Lt. Col. Dale Zelko, call sign Vega 31, from the 49th Fighter Wing at Holloman AFB, NM. Laushine asked for data on the enemy threats that they would have to deal with to get him out. Cardoso was a bit concerned, thinking, “a Stealth just got shot down and now [they] want us to go in there?” However, he was now a highly experienced Pave Low pilot and knew that, while the immediate plan was not clear, the crews knew what they had to do and would figure out a way to get Zelko out of there.¹⁶

The requested information promptly flowed into the command center. Intelligence sources indicated that Vega 31 was down near Novi Sad, Serbia, an estimated 90 miles from Tuzla. Those sources also reported that the Serbs realized they had shot down an F-117 and were scrambling to capture the pilot. Several flights of A-10s and other supporting aircraft were being launched to assist in the rescue. With that information, Laushine directed his task force to take off and head north to set up a rendezvous with the A-10s near Osijek in northeast Croatia.¹⁷

An hour later, at 2050Z, the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) authorized the rescue force to launch. The three helicopters quickly launched and headed north. In this area, at least,

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Table 1.
Special Tactics Personnel, "Vega-31" F-117 Rescue, March 27/28, 1999

MH-53M (Chalk Lead)	MH-53J (Chalk 2)	MH-60G (Chalk 3)
Anthony "Tony" Negron (PJ)	Nate C. (PJ)	Eric G. (PJ)
Lance Supernaw (PJ)	Ronald E. (PJ)	John M. J. (PJ)
Rob P. (CCT)	Christopher B. (CCT)	Donald "D. J." Cantwell (CCT)

Source: History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, pp 101-106 email, CMSgt Wayne G. Norrad (USAF, Ret) to Marion, Aug 31, 2010; email, Lt Col Dale P. Zelko (USAF, Ret) to Marion, Sep 29, 2010; various emails.

the air was clear, and night visibility was good, although the moon was slowly setting. En route, though, they had difficulties establishing communications with the A-10s and other support aircraft as Laushine tried to organize the recovery effort. Meanwhile, Zelko had been able to use his handheld GPS to determine his location and had securely passed it to a C-130 orbiting over Kosovo. The C-130 crew quickly forwarded it through intelligence channels to Laushine. The reported position, validated by the A-10 flight lead, Capt. John Cherrey, who had established radio communications with and authenticated the survivor, indicated that Vega 31 was on the ground just south of the city of Ruma, 25 miles farther south. This was much closer to Belgrade, the heavily defended Serbian capital, and necessitated a complete rework of the recovery plan as the helicopter crews quickly entered Zelko's reported GPS location into their navigation systems.¹⁸

To save fuel, Cardoso directed his flight crews to land their helicopters and dismount their ST elements and some ODA troops to provide site security. The ST elements aboard the helicopters consisted of the individuals listed above in Table 1.

Meanwhile, Cardoso, copilot Glass, and seat flight engineer SSgt. Bill Clemons frantically built a new route to the survivor while the crew of Moccasin 61 coordinated for a MC-130P to refuel the helicopters. Once that was worked out, the helicopters re-launched, quickly rendezvoused with the tanker, just 700 feet above the ground, and took on fuel as ground fog and low clouds were forming in the area. They repositioned to a holding point west of Ruma but still in Bosnian airspace and awaited the arrival of Cherrey's flight, which would escort them in to the survivor and provide top cover against any threats that challenged them.¹⁹

Enemy forces were now aware of Zelko's presence and were fully mobilizing to capture him. Time was of the essence. As Captain Cherrey was orchestrating his portion of the effort, he received an intelligence report that Zelko had been captured. Cherrey called him on his survival radio and re-authenticated him. The rescue was on.²⁰

Finally, the rescue package received approval to cross into Serbian airspace. At the holding point, Cherrey briefed Cardoso and his flight on the escort and recovery plan. He told Cardoso to call him when they were two miles from Zelko so that he could tell Zelko to turn on his signaling device. They all acknowledged the plan, and Cherrey directed them to execute.²¹

Descending to fifty feet above the terrain, the CSAR three-ship proceeded inbound toward the survivor. Several times, Cardoso increased his altitude to one hundred feet to avoid obstacles and populated areas. Throughout the night, the helicopters had been operating mostly in clear air. As they turned inbound to Zelko, though, they encountered a layer of low-hanging clouds, fog, and rain. Flight engineer TSgt. Ed Hux, serving as the right-door gunner and scanner on Cardoso's aircraft, noted, "It was probably in the top five of the darkest nights that I have ever flown in 30 years of flying." As visibility rapidly deteriorated, Cardoso and his crew, already wearing NVGs, began utilizing the forward-looking infrared radar (FLIR) system to proceed. Unfortunately, as they entered the low scud, Cherrey and his flight could no longer see the helicopters to provide direct fire support. They themselves were being engaged by deadly SA-6 missile batteries and were now occupied just avoiding Zelko's fate.²²

Entering the scud at about 50 feet above the ground, the two other helicopters held tactical formation on Moccasin 60 so that they did not get separated while so dangerously close to the ground. On board all three helicopters, gunners and flight engineers were earnestly scanning for immediate physical threats such as trees, towers, or power lines—anything that could damage or destroy a helicopter—as well as enemy forces. Suddenly, Hux spotted an uncharted power line in the haze, just ahead and level with the helicopters. He quickly shouted, "Wires! Climb! Climb!" as copilot Glass echoed his call. Cardoso immediately reacted and pulled back on the controls, flying his helicopter up and over the threatening wires. The other two crews maintained formation and also avoided the threat. Once clear of the wires, Cardoso descended the flight back down about 100 feet and proceeded toward Zelko.²³

Approaching Vega's location, the helicopters encountered Serbian spotlights vainly looking for them. But there was no ground fire. About three miles from Vega, the CSAR team spotted three Serbian trucks evenly spaced on a road as enemy troops searched for the F-117 pilot. Two miles from Vega's location, the rescuers contacted the survivor but they could not see him. Vega's infrared strobe was inoperable and he couldn't locate his pen-gun flares. Cardoso's team told him to fire his overt flare. Vega did so. Immediately, SrA. Shawn M. S. (last initial only), the MH-60G flight engineer, spotted it—one-half mile to the east. Seeing the flare, Capt.

The crew of Moccasin 60 the morning after rescuing Vega 31, Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: (Left to right), MSgt. John Dubuisson, Capt. John Glass, TSgt. Ed Hux, SSgt. Bill Clemons, SrA. Chris Bloomfield, and Capt. Jim Cardoso. (Source: Col. Jim Cardoso.)



IN SPITE OF THE...INITIAL EXPECTATIONS OF A SHORT, LIMITED AIR CAMPAIGN, THE OPERATION INCREASED IN INTENSITY

Chad P. Franks, the Pave Hawk aircraft commander, turned toward Vega and headed inbound. The two Pave Lows also turned so as to overfly Vega, then turned to the west to hold. Franks flew the approach to the ground, the helicopter settling down as close to Vega as was relatively safe—the survivor was just outside the path of the rotor blades. Special Tactics personnel—consisting of pararescuemen Eric G. (last initial only) (team lead, 304th Rescue Squadron) and John M. J. (last initial only), and combat controller Donald “D. J.” Cantwell—quickly exited and assisted Vega aboard. Zelko heard the almost incredible greeting for which he might have lost hope. Grabbing him, they announced, “Your PJs are here to take you home!” Forty-five seconds after landing, Franks’ aircraft was airborne, heading that way.²⁴

Rejoining the Pave Lows, the MH-60G and the 53s flew a different route leaving Serbia than on the ingress. As they approached the border with Bosnia, they observed Serbian anti-aircraft fire in the vicinity of their previous flight path. Without being able to see the aircraft, the Serbians appeared to be firing volleys in hopes that the helicopters were flying the same route as before. After the grueling five and one-half hour mission, Cardoso’s team landed safely at Tuzla at 0254Z. To Captain Cardoso, the results spoke for themselves. “We went in with 37 [personnel], and came back with 38.”²⁵ Colonel Zelko underwent a physical examination before being flown to Aviano AB, Italy. Both Cardoso and Franks earned

Silver Stars for the rescue mission; other crew members received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), and in 2000, Cardoso received the James Jabara Airmanship Award for the leadership he provided in the rescue.²⁶

However, this mission had another significance, perhaps unrecognized at this time but profound in its historical implications. In 1967, at a time when the USAF was engaged in an intense theater war in Southeast Asia (SEA) and losing aircraft and aircrews on a daily basis, its commanders in SEA forwarded to the Pentagon a requirement, SEA Operational Requirement 114, which called for “an integrated system to enable . . . helicopters to perform the essential elements of search and rescue under conditions of total darkness and/or low visibility.”²⁷ It took another thirteen years of development before that capability was finally consummated in the HH-53H helicopters that then became the MH-53 Pave Low aircraft. However, it took the right crews, PJs, ST airmen, young air commandos, men of consummate professionalism and intense drive, to operationally bring those helicopters alive. It was the men and machines together that made it all work. And this rescue operation was classic air commando. Moccasin 60 did not land to recover Vega 31, although it could have done so. Instead, it provided the overall leadership for the mission to facilitate the recovery action by the brave crew of Gator 07.²⁸

The simple truth is that in the early morning

The crews of Skat 11 and 12, the morning after rescuing Hammer 34. (Left to right, top: TSgt. Lou Orrie, 1st. Lt. Tom Lang; middle, SSgt. Vince DePersio, SSgt. Dan Weimer, SrA. Grady Galvin, SrA. Eric Fricsons, 2d. Lt. Dan Nielson; front, Capt. Kent Landreth, SSgt. Barry Bergschneider, 1st. Lt. Tom Palenske, SSgt. Dub Scott, SSgt. Bill Kerwood (deceased). (Source: Lt. Col. Kent Landreth.)



hours of March 28, 1999 in the skies over Serbia, a concept germinated 32 years earlier in the frustrations of the long war in Southeast Asia finally came to fruition. More than three decades of conceptualizing, planning, modifying, organizing, and training jelled in one seminal moment, and the rescue of Vega 31, Lt. Col. Dale Zelko, was the final and ultimate fulfillment of that requirement. His freedom was the end result of the right equipment and the right men at the right place at the right time, and for all of the right reasons.²⁹

Hammer 34

In spite of the U.S./NATO's initial expectations of a short, limited air campaign, the operation increased in intensity, continuing until early June when Milosevic, faced with a crumbling economy and dwindling popular support, finally agreed to withdraw from Kosovo. The Serbian leader remained obstinate until perhaps beginning to fear that a NATO ground option into Kosovo—which, unwisely, had been taken “off the table” at the outset—might be under consideration. In any case, the prolonged air campaign provided a second opportunity for the combat rescue of a downed Airman from Serbia. By that time, the CSAR crews spent several days at a time forward-deployed to Tuzla AB rather than sending crews from Brindisi on a daily basis, a practice that taxed people and machines more than was necessary.³⁰

On May 2, Serbian ground fire severely damaged an A-10 over Kosovo. However, the pilot was able to land the aircraft at the airport at Skopje, Macedonia. Later that evening, though, Serbian gunners downed a USAF F-16CG, call sign

“Hammer-34,” flown by Lt. Col. David Goldfein, near the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. The primary CSAR alert package of three helicopters—just as before, two Pave Lows and a Pave Hawk—launched from Tuzla AB as soon as the downed pilot was located, authenticated, and a threat assessment accomplished. Again, the RMC was Lt. Col. Steve Laushine. His lead MH-53M was flown by Capt. Greg Landreth, 1st Lt. Tom Palenske, and crew, with the call sign of Skat 11. Capt. Tom Lang, 1st Lt. Dan Nielsen, and crew, flew the second MH-53 as Skat 12; and Capt. Bill Denehan, 1st Lt. Tom Kunkel, and crew, flew the MH-60 as Skat 13. Just like the Vega 31 recovery force, the helicopter package also had ST elements and an ODA onboard.³¹

Hammer's shoot-down occurred four hours later into the night than did Vega's, which gave the CSAR force less time to work with. Almost certainly, a daylight rescue in many parts of Serbia would have been too risky to undertake. Unlike the first mission, as the rescue force crossed the Serbian border it came under surface-to-air missile fire. Executing standard countermeasures, each helicopter crew managed to evade no less than three missiles while inbound to the objective area. Also unlike the Vega mission, on May 2 the night was beautiful, clear, with no clouds and a full moon—which increased the threat because “the Serbs knew we were coming,” noted one crewmember, and enjoyed better visibility of the rescue force.³²

The helicopters also encountered large caliber antiaircraft fire but evaded it by jinking and terrain masking maneuvers. Despite hearing radio traffic suggesting that the helicopters should hold and await close air support escort, mission commander Colonel Laushine, aboard Skat 11, pushed the small

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THE MH-60G
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FROM THE
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TREELINE

(Left to right) Lt. Col. Steve Laushine, and the crew of Skat 13: Capt. Tom Kunkle, SrA. Rich Kelley, Capt. Bill Denehan, SSgt. Jack Gainer, all 55th SOS personnel.



THE CASE OF BOTTLED WATER SERVED AS A CONVENIENT STEP FOR THE SCAMPERING AIRMEN AS THEY SCRAMBLED ABOARD

force forward to the objective area. Once in the area, the rescue helos linked up with Goldfein's flight lead, Hammer 33, who had assumed the OSC role, and vectored the helicopter task force to the survivor's position. Two miles from his location, the MH-60G pilot, Capt. Denehan, spotted ground fire from his aircraft's four o'clock position. The flight engineer, SSgt. Richard D. K. (last initial only), returned fire using the helicopter's minigun. Immediately, the rescuers contacted the downed pilot and directed him to turn on his strobe light. Making one pass over the survivor, the Pave Hawk and MH-53M failed to obtain a "visual" on him. However, they turned on their Precision Location System which gave them a vector towards the survivor's location. Denehan spotted Goldfein's strobe light and dashed in for the pickup as the Pave Lows orbited above, guns ready to suppress any immediate threat to the force. Denehan landed his Pave Hawk at 0245Z on sloped terrain in a field near the survivor. The Special Tactics team of PJs Jeremy Hardy (team lead) and Ronald E. (last initial only) and combat controller Andrew Kubik jumped out to secure the survivor. As they did, they inadvertently knocked out a case of bottled water. In the distance, they could hear guns aboard one of the Pave Lows engaging Serbian forces.³³

Unfortunately, Serbian soldiers had also spotted Hammer-34, and "were closing in quickly," as the AFSOC command historian, Mr. Herb Mason, stated later:

As soon as the MH-60G landed, Hammer 34 bolted from the nearby treeline. Unable to identify the pilot as a friendly, Sergeant Hardy trained his M-4 rifle on the pilot who immediately went submissive. Taking just seconds to authenticate the F-16 pilot, the special tactics team placed Hammer 34 aboard . . . and quickly piled on top of him to pro-

tect him from any incoming ground fire. A scant 20 seconds after landing, Captain Denehan quickly took off to the sound of gunfire coming from the southwest.³⁴

The case of bottled water served as a convenient step for the scampering airmen as they scrambled aboard and shouted "go, go, go!" Unaware that Goldfein's legs were still partly dangling out of the aircraft, Denehan lifted off and climbed quickly to rejoin the MH-53s. Changing their outbound route, the flight of helicopters encountered minimal ground fire but required a "hard break left" near the border to avoid an enemy position. The rescue team landed safely at Tuzla at 0330Z. As in the rescue of Vega-31, the pickup helicopter pilot (Capt. Denehan) and the lead MH-53M pilot (Capt. Landreth) each received the Silver Star; their crews received DFC's. Comparing the two rescues, mission commander Laushine noted that overall the second CSAR "went a lot smoother than the first," despite the fact that radio discipline was poor. There were "way too many people on the radios talking," he added. There was irony in the fact that the unit to which the Vega and Hammer pickup helicopters belonged was the 55th Special Operations Squadron. The 55th was slated for inactivation later in the year. This deployment was their "swan song."³⁵

For rescuer and rescuee, there was at least one personal remembrance of the dramatic event in later years. In 2010, pararescueman Jeremy Hardy was promoted to chief master sergeant. The presiding official for the ceremony was Maj. Gen. David L. Goldfein—Hammer-34, Hardy's rescued pilot.³⁶

Six weeks after the rescue of Hammer-34, the air campaign ended as Serbian ruler Milosevic returned to the negotiating table and agreed to pull his forces out of a ravaged Kosovo. The two success-

Table 2.
Special Tactics Personnel, “Hammer-34” F-16 Rescue, May 2, 1999

MH-53M (Chalk Lead)	MH-53J (Chalk 2)	MH-60G (Chalk 3)
Robert W. B. (PJ)	Darryl C. (PJ)	Ronald E. (PJ)
Isaiah S. (PJ)	Juan M. Ridout (PJ)	Jeremy S. Hardy (PJ)
Ryan M. Stanhope (CCT)	Christopher B. (CCT)	Andrew Kubik (CCT)

Source: Hist , AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, pp 106-109; vol 5, SD 111-19 ; email (U), SMSgt Jeremy S. Hardy (USAF) to Marion, Sep 3, 2010; various emails.

ful combat rescues of Vega-31 and Hammer-34 were, in the words of the official USAF report on the campaign, “among the most significant tactical successes of the air war over Serbia.” Arguably, it was only the *success* of both rescues—particularly the first—that precluded their *strategic* signifi-

cance from being more readily appreciated. Put another way, had a U.S. Air Force F-117 pilot been captured and shown to the world on camera, the situation would have been far more than a tactical issue for the U.S. and its allies; rather, a strategic and political crisis of the highest order.³⁷ ■

NOTES

1. Report, *The One Year Report of The Air War Over Serbia: Aerospace Power in Operation Allied Force, Volume 1* (Washington DC: Headquarters USAF, Oct 2000), pp. 5-7. Legally, Kosovo was under Serbian sovereignty.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11, 45.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
5. Nick Richardson, *No Escape Zone* (London, UK: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), pp. 140, 229.
6. Martin R. Berndt, “Recovery of Basher 52,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol 121, no 11 (Nov 1995), pp. 41-43.
7. Darrel Whitcomb, “Searching for Ebro-33,” *Air Power History* 49 (Fall 2002), pp. 34-39; Roger Thurow, “Among Serbs, Facts Clash With Fancy In Attack on Gorazde,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr 18, 1994, p. 1; History, Air Force Special Operations Command [AFSOC hereinafter], Jan-Dec 1995, vol 1, pp. 150-51. All unit Histories cited herein are held at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
8. Darrel Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace* (Maxwell AFB, AL; Air University Press, Sep. 2012), pp. 446-47.
9. History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1998, vol 1, p. 92; History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, pp. 86, 88, 96-97. The third specialty included under Air Force Special Tactics was that of Special Operations Weather Team personnel. All three specialties were under the Air Force’s 720th Special Tactics Group. based at Hurlburt Field, Fla. At the start of operations in March 1999, in addition to the deployed helicopters, AFSOC had four MC-130P tankers and two AC-130U gunships stationed in Italy.
10. Interview F. L. Marion, AFHRA, with Lt. Col. Bradley P. Thompson (USAF), Dec 18, 2006.
11. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, p. 447.
12. Interview Darrel Whitcomb, with Col. (USAF, Ret.) Paul Harmon, Oct 15, 2009; Interview Darrel Whitcomb, with Brig. Gen. Tom Trask, Aug 12, 2009.
13. Interview Darrel Whitcomb, with Col. Jim Slife, Jan 26, 2010; Interview Darrel Whitcomb, with Col. Jim Cardoso, Sept 21, 2009.
14. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, pp. 448-449.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 448-49.
16. Interview Whitcomb – Cardoso.
17. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, pp. 449-454.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 449-50.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 450.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Interview Darrel Whitcomb with CMSgt (USAF, Ret) Ed Hux, Feb 1, 2010.
23. Interview Whitcomb - Hux.
24. History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, p. 104-105; email, CMSgt Wayne G. Norrad (USAF, Ret) to Marion, Aug 31, 2010; email, SMSgt Robert Lapointe (USAF, Ret) to Marion, Sep. 6, 2010; email, Dale P. Zelko to Marion, Sep. 29, 2010; email, Donald J. Cantwell to Marion, Jul 26, 2011; Richard J. Newman, “Silver Stars,” *Air Force Magazine*, vol. 83 (Jun. 2000), pp. 82-83.
25. Interview Whitcomb - Cardoso.
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27. History, Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, 1 July 1970 – 30 June 1971, vol 1, p. 191.
28. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, p. 453.
29. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, p. 454.
30. Report, *One Year Report . . . Air War Over Serbia*, pp. 71-72; Interview F. L. Marion, AFHRA, with Lt Col Stephan J. Laushine, Sep. 10, 2001.
31. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride*, p. 456.
32. History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, pp. 106-107; Report, *One Year Report . . . Air War Over Serbia*, p. 48; Interview Marion - Laushine.
33. History , AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, pp. 107-108; Interview Marion - Laushine; email, Andrew Kubik to Marion, Jul 6, 2011; Newman, “Silver Stars,” p. 82; Presentation. Lt. Col. Bill Denehan, CSAR Conference, Moody AFB, GA, May 30 2014.
34. History, AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, p. 108; Newman, “Silver Stars,” p. 82.
35. History AFSOC, Jan-Dec 1999, vol 1, p. 108-109; Interview Marion - Laushine; Newman, “Silver Stars,” p. 82; Presentation. Lt Col Bill Denehan, CSAR Conference, Moody AFB, GA, May 30 2014.
36. Email, SMSgt. Jeremy S. Hardy (USAF) to Marion, Sep. 3, 2010.
37. Report, *One Year Report . . . Air War Over Serbia*, p. 48 [emphasis added].