

The Contract Broken, and Restored

Air Rescue in Operation Inherent Resolve, 2014–2017 (Part 2 of 2)

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Establishing a Dedicated Combat Search and Rescue/ Pararescue Capability, 2015–2016

Following the killing of 1st Lt Moaz Youssef al-Kasasbeh of the Jordanian Air Force (call sign Blade-11), US Central Command/US Air Forces Central Command (USCENTCOM/USAFCENT) rushed an HH-60G Pave Hawk element from Europe to the massive airfield at Erbil, Iraq. The three Pave Hawks became operational by early February 2015. Airmen had conducted strike missions over ISIS-contested territory for six months without the benefit of what AFDD 3-50 called “the premier PRO helicopter.” Pararescuemen (also known as Guardian Angels)—specialists in rescue-affiliated communications and recovery techniques and combat trauma care—joined the HH-60G crews. At roughly the same time, an HC-130J Combat King II element of two rescue-equipped tankers deployed from the United States and became operational at Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait, where simultaneously a maintenance-support package had been quickly ramped up from caretaker to operational status.¹

The pararescuemen were divided between Erbil and Ali Al Salem. Lt Col James E. Brunner considered the split nature of rescue assets as the biggest challenge early in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), in part because it required an inordinate amount of coordination including the takeoff times for missions that varied by aircraft type. For maximum efficiency, Combat Search and Rescue/Pararescue (CSAR/PR) planners preferred having all three legs of the “Rescue triad”—HH-60G, HC-130J, and Pararescue assets—in the same location.²

Although senior leadership was ultimately responsible for beginning an air campaign without CSAR/PR in theater, to its credit, following the loss of Blade-11, US leaders implemented what one PR plans officer surmised was “a

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deliberate respite” during the several weeks required to get the HH-60Gs deployed.³ One shudders to think what might have happened if a second Airman had been lost during that period, and the consequences surely would have reverberated in capitals beyond the operational theater, including Washington. Lt Col Aaron Griffith recalled that while the Pave Hawks were preparing to deploy to Erbil, USAFCENT’s “PR shop used that time to distribute new specialized radios and beacons for use by the most at-risk isolated personnel (especially downed Airmen) and for training coalition personnel at risk of isolation and their PR nodes on individual and staff initial actions and reporting” in the case of another incident. The combination of the lieutenant’s loss and the frenetic attempts to get the new equipment and training to those most in need of it (much of it driven by the Air Staff) created, in Griffith’s words, “a crisis of confidence that we had provided our Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines all that we could have.” That crisis was valid. Whether the question of why such equipment and training had not been provided before Blade’s loss—even prior to flying the first OIR strike sortie—may or may not have been voiced openly, but it must have been pondered. A troubling and complicating factor was that at least some of the new equipment could not be shared with the coalition.⁴

An “Anemic” Air Campaign

Regardless of upbeat announcements coming out of Washington, for at least a year, the administration dragged its collective feet regarding the campaign against ISIS. At the end of 2015, one commentator wrote that the Obama strategy to date “is, in reality, a combination of half measures and outdated ideas.” US air strikes on Syria averaged only seven a day. Even more alarming, perhaps, Abe Greenwald noted that nearly three-quarters of planned US bombing sorties against ISIS “never drop their payloads owing either to insufficient ground intelligence or overly strict rules of engagement.” Earlier in the year, the director of the London-based Air League, airpower expert Andrew Brookes, cautioned, “I am not convinced that we are knocking ISIS back,” and he argued in favor of air strikes in coordination with a ground campaign.⁵

Retired USAF Lt Gen David Deptula added his voice in mid-2015, calling the air strikes to that point “anemic.” At the end of the year, he stated the small-scale bombings resulted from a risk-averse administration, inordinate concern over civilian casualties, and an emphasis on counterinsurgency. Deptula’s last-mentioned point stemmed from the fact that ISIS was not an insurgency, although the administration treated it as such. Rather, it controlled the infrastructure and resources of a state, making for much simpler targeting than an insurgency. As one knowledgeable writer who spent time in the theater expressed, “There is a front

line in this war. . . . maps in operations centers have lines defining ISIS-controlled territory.” In 2019, Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, a career Rescue HH-60G pilot who three years earlier had been based at Diyarbakir AB, Turkey, recalled the deployment in 2016 had been the first of his six in which there was a forward line of troops, northeast of Mosul. In mid-2016, Deptula, dean of the Washington-based Mitchell Institute of Airpower Studies, reiterated his concern, describing the strikes against ISIS in Syria as “anemic relative to previous air campaigns that were effective.” At that point, US airstrikes averaged a miniscule 15 sorties a day: nine against Iraq, six over Syria. By comparison, even the Serbia air campaign in 1999—following a slow start when US-Coalition leadership wrongly expected Serbian president Slobodan Milošević to quit after two or three days of air strikes—averaged nearly 300 strike sorties daily.⁶

From Erbil, Iraq, to Diyarbakir, Turkey

The Erbil-based HH-60G teams, two of which served roughly four-month deployments, provided dedicated CSAR/PR coverage until October 2015 when the replacement Pave Hawk detachment relocated just after its arrival at Erbil, to Diyarbakir. The incoming pair of Rescue tankers deployed directly from the United States to the latter base. CSAR/PR alert duties transferred from Erbil to Diyarbakir near the first of the month as the newly-arrived HH-60G and HC-130J crews at Diyarbakir became established, along with the most recently-deployed PR element. By that time, the 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group had been activated (in July), providing an institutional home for CSAR/PR forces under CJTF-OIR.⁷

The stand-up of dedicated CSAR/PR assets considerably closer to the target area was a huge step in the right direction. However, it was not enough on the rotary-wing side to allow unit leaders to breathe easily. As Col Greg Roberts put it, while two HC-130s could effectively cover the Iraq–Syria theater, the same was not true for three Pave Hawks: “You can’t effectively cover the whole [area of responsibility] with one two-ship of H-60’s and a spare. . . . We thought the best we could get away with was five [HH-60G’s],” with two helicopters at two different locations (north, south) plus a spare. “That crisis of steel dogged the 1st Rescue group from day one [of his command, in July 2015] . . . through the first of July the following year,” when Roberts departed.⁸ Colonel Roberts stated the PR task force requirement of two unit type codes (UTC) of HH-60Gs—totaling six helicopters—two of pararescue, and one of HC-130Js had been submitted by US-AFCENT and validated by the Joint Staff, but it was pared down to one UTC for each weapon system somewhere between the Air Staff and Headquarters Air Combat Command.⁹

Only Three Pave Hawks, Maintenance, and Ad Hockery

A three-helicopter element at Diyarbakir was no small risk given the age and long, hard usage of the Pave Hawk fleet. In 2015, *The Daily Signal* reported, “the current fleet of Pave Hawks face a litany of maintenance issues after more than a decade of heavy use in austere environments.”¹⁰ Three years later, at least two official Pentagon news items highlighted the dangerous trends concerning the Rescue helicopter fleet. Focusing on the Okinawa-based 33rd Rescue Squadron and the increasing problem of airframe structural cracks, *Defense News* referred to “an overworked fleet of aircraft that is literally coming apart at the seams” as the HH-60Gs approached or exceeded the (revised) planned 7,000-hour lifespan.¹¹ *Air Force Magazine* reported, “Only 68 percent of the 96-helicopter fleet were mission-capable in fiscal 2017, well below the Air Force’s desired mission-capable rate of 75 percent.” Flight time throughout the Pave Hawk inventory averaged 7,100 hours, 18 percent higher than the 6,000-hour initial expected service life.¹²

For the initial Rescue deployment to Diyarbakir, the two maintenance officers, Maj Paul A. Campbell and Capt Stephen D. Weigel, arrived at the airfield in November 2015. They were preceded by a maintenance team from Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, led by CMSgt Kevin Davis, which set up most of the US compound for the first rotation of CSAR/PR aircrews. The crews of two HC-130J tankers and three HH-60G helicopters assumed alert around the first of October, providing rescue coverage in support of OIR.¹³

Most aviators considered Pave Hawk maintenance to be outstanding in the theater. Two experienced maintainers, SMSgt Mark W. Aube and MSgt Marcus J. Sydow, noted that preventive maintenance normally was accomplished at home station so the deploying aircraft “[go] there 100 percent,” plus the Rescue aircraft typically did not fly as much while deployed as at home station. When work came up at the deployed base, everyone wanted to be a part of it. Referring to the HC-130J-model tankers—two were deployed—they were new and hardly ever broke, Aube recalled.¹⁴

During one period of about three weeks in late 2016, however, one of the three HH-60Gs at Diyarbakir was out of service for a cracked “308 beam.” In that case there was no maintenance or safety margin, should the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC) require a Pave Hawk two-ship out of Diyarbakir. And for one day during that period, the Rescue group informed the JPRC they were down to one good helicopter, as one of the other two H-60s required repairs for something required for combat. Although the Diyarbakir-based CSAR team was second to Al Asad’s by that time (Al Asad’s Rescue team began operations in October 2016), the lack of a backup helicopter was a concern, nonetheless. In 2018, the USAF-

CENT deputy chief of PR and a retired colonel, Mr. Steven P. Kelley, summed up the state of the aging Pave Hawk fleet, stating, “It’s been run into the ground.”¹⁵

Of the approximately 96 Pave Hawks USAF-wide, 82 were designated for operational purposes and 14 for training and development. In 2015, if not later, Nellis AFB, Nevada, supported no less than 18 Pave Hawks, “the largest HH-60 fleet in the Air Force,” one maintenance unit program manager observed. Whether sent out from Nellis or a train/test facility, admittedly, a decision to send even one previously unplanned Pave Hawk halfway around the world was bound to create various programmatic, logistic, and administrative headaches. But no matter the lens through which one looked, in the final analysis, which was the higher priority: keeping stateside requirements on track—as important as those were—or providing an increased margin of safety for aircrews hitting ISIS targets which, in the unlikely event that one was downed and captured by the enemy, expected to be burned alive in a cage, or something worse, to viewers worldwide?¹⁶

The CSAR/PR forces committed to preventing such a tragic end included USAF A-10C Thunderbolt II close air support aircraft, whose pilots, while not tasked solely with rescue (they had their own ISIS targets to hit), nevertheless expected to play a leading role in any rescue mission. Traditionally, in many cases A-10 pilots located, authenticated, and protected the survivor before the helicopters arrived, and during the most vulnerable moments when the helicopter was in a hover or on the ground, protected it as well. Lt Col Mark A. Redfern, who commanded the 75th Fighter Squadron during its deployment to Incirlik AB, Turkey, from October 2015 to March 2016, considered the CSAR/PR setup “not great” when his A-10 unit arrived. He would have preferred another HH-60 or two among the available assets.¹⁷

Prior to October, A-10s had supported OIR from Ahmad al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait, but the 75th was the first Warthog squadron to operate from Incirlik. The unit had been uncertain of its destination up to two weeks before departing home station, and its personnel deployed lacking written orders, going to war on verbal orders only—ad hockery to be sure. Upon arriving at Incirlik, which required upgrading to support bomb-dropping aircraft for the first time in years, Redfern observed a “very ad hoc” approach and a lack of a common frame of reference regarding CSAR/PR operations in theater. Although the 75th’s predecessors had made progress with “CSAR standards” for OIR, Redfern’s squadron upgraded and propagated the standards among the several players, including the Marine Corps, Navy, and coalition forces. The standards took into account that Marine MV-22 Osprey assault support aircraft were potential participants in a rescue or personnel recovery mission; as were, by 2016, US Navy or coalition helicopters. If he had to leave his jet and was rolled-up by the enemy, Redfern estimated his own

life expectancy at about 15 minutes once ISIS realized he was a commander. In any case, all players in a CSAR/PR scenario needed to know what to expect from Sandy-1, the call sign of the handful of A-10 pilots most highly qualified in combat rescue escort and charged with directing the rescue mission.¹⁸

From about 1 February 2016 until mid-April, four US Navy MH-60S Knight-hawk helicopters and some 70 personnel, detached from the USS *Harry S. Truman*, were stationed at Erbil airport to support the CSAR/PR mission for OIR. While they were not placed under the tactical control of the 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group (1ERQG) commander, Colonel Roberts, he was glad to have them even on a coordination-only basis. Although the MH-60 crews styled themselves jacks-of-all-trades-and-masters-of-none—rescue was one of their several mission sets including utility and special operations duties—their capability matched that of any other, non-USAF CSAR/PR rotary-wing assets made available at the time. The MH-60 crews operated out of the same facilities used the year prior by the PR task force's HH-60Gs. One huge drawback was that the Navy helicopters were not air refuelable and so were limited in their effective radius for any potential rescue.¹⁹



(US Air Force photo by SSgt Keith James)

Figure 1. 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group conducts combat search and rescue exercise. An HH-60 Pave Hawk assigned to the 46th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron arrives at the site of a simulated aircraft crash site to provide personnel recovery operations and support for Battlefield Airmen assigned to the 52nd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron on the ground assisting role players in an undisclosed location, Iraq, 15 July 2018. The primary mission of the HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter is to conduct day or night personnel recovery operations into hostile environments to recover isolated personnel. Battlefield Airmen assigned throughout the combined joint operational area conduct operations in support of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, which aims to enable and equip local forces to take ISIS head on while leveraging Coalition nation airpower to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

In the only retrieval of a downed aircrew by Inherent Resolve's CSAR/PR forces, on 5 March 2016, a twin turboprop aircraft crash-landed in a field west of Erbil, Iraq. At least one of the Navy's Erbil-based MH-60S helicopters responded within four minutes of the alert and recovered all four personnel from the US Army-registered aircraft, assisted by 52nd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron parascuemen (within 1ERQG). The four were uninjured, and the aircraft's downing was not due to hostile action but was apparently technical in nature. If the situation had required further assistance, however, an HC-130J had launched from Diyarbakir AB and was available. But perhaps in part because of reluctance on the part of USAFCENT and the JPRC to clarify tactical control and launch authority issues—despite USAFCENT's practical ownership of the JPRC mission—Colonel Roberts recalled the short and successful mission fueled an extended, rancorous discussion among the JPRC, USAFCENT staff, and the Navy MH-60 crews on whether the Erbil detachment had possessed the proper authority to conduct the mission.²⁰

Issues with an Ally

By the end of August 2015, the host nation, Turkey, had begun operating its Diyarbakir-based air-to-ground F-16s on OIR missions as part of the US-led coalition, a step facilitated by the ISIS-inspired suicide bombing a month earlier at Suruc, Turkey. Further, and important to US combat rescue efforts, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to allow CSAR/PR assets to operate from Diyarbakir may have taken on a heightened sense of urgency. His government had agreed to the basing plan in April, but things moved slowly after that. Basing the rescue assets at Diyarbakir not only placed them closer to the fight than in Kuwait or Erbil but also accorded with Air Force personnel recovery operations doctrine that called for positioning forces "as far forward as the situation allows." It was not long, however, before the shifting battle lines made the Turkish base's "tyranny of distance" from the ground fight an increasingly problematic planning factor for personnel recovery forces.²¹

Despite the Turkish government's decision to join the coalition in 2015, its purpose differed from that of the United States from the very beginning of Inherent Resolve. As one Arab government official expressed, "There are two competing objectives within the coalition. Some countries are more interested in removing Assad [notably, Turkey], while other countries are more interested in addressing the extremist threat." Two *Middle East Policy* scholars surmised that Washington and Ankara will "likely find it increasingly difficult to respond to the changing dynamics on the ground or to forge a common front."²²

Despite sharing one side of Diyarbakir's airfield with the Turks' commercial terminal (Turkish F-16s were based on the opposite side of the airfield), there was adequate ramp space for additional CSAR aircraft. In the view of the Rescue group's maintenance squadron commander, Major Campbell, "We had the ramp space, if the Turks . . . agreed to it." Rather, it was a matter of "optics," Campbell was convinced. His boss, Colonel Roberts, tried in vain to acquire additional Pave Hawks, making the question of where they might be based a non-issue. The reality was the Rescue group possessed only three HH-60Gs and two HC-130Js, at Diyarbakir, which meant that no more than a single helicopter, or tanker, could be non-mission capable at any time to maintain a two-ship helicopter element, plus a tanker, on alert. The far greater concern was for the rotary-wing capability, not so much the tankers.²³

The optics issue that Campbell perceived probably resulted from Turkish suspicions that the 1ERQG's aircraft were assisting the hated Kurds surreptitiously. While it was no secret that the United States was, in fact, supporting the Kurds, 1ERQG aircraft did not do so. In Major Campbell's opinion, such suspicion was the logical explanation for the excessive customs checks of US aircraft required by Turkish officials at the airfield. An unnamed USAF officer based at Incirlik AB, who otherwise thought very highly of the Turks and their military, recounted that the first part of many meetings he attended in 2017 consisted of his hosts telling the US personnel that the Turkish government thought the United States was supporting terrorism by working with the Kurds. The same officer also noted that lower- to mid-ranking Turkish Air Force officers became highly risk averse, afraid to make any decisions on their own, perhaps the result of a failed military coup in July 2016. In any case, issues had to be elevated to the O-6 level to get anything accomplished. But whatever the reasons for the onerous customs practices, other Rescue Airmen commented on the generally frustrating relations with the Turks. One Pave Hawk pilot, a captain based at Diyarbakir, bluntly stated, the Americans "kinda tried to stay out of their way." An A-10 pilot and squadron commander who deployed to Incirlik in 2017 felt the Turks "tolerated our presence, barely." The Turks' bureaucratic hurdles made clear to the Americans that they were not especially welcome. One example was the Turks' arbitrary limiting of the number of maintenance helicopter flights permitted on a given day, a frustrating hindrance to keeping the three Pave Hawks flyable.²⁴

Aside from the Turks' coolness toward their longtime NATO ally, the US logistics system that provided aircraft parts to the Rescue group at Diyarbakir suffered from two main issues: the first was perhaps partly self-induced, but the second was a Turkish matter. As 1ERQG maintenance personnel explained, when US aircraft parts were flown from Ramstein AB, Germany, to Turkey, the items

went through customs at Istanbul. But, then, as Marcus Sydow recalled ruefully from his 2016 deployment, the parts “would just crawl across the country over to Diyarbakir,” for reasons not entirely clear. Eventually, the group obtained a customs liaison to track down delayed or missing parts, which in many cases had been taking close to three weeks to get to Diyarbakir even with a supposedly priority assignment. It was very frustrating for the Rescue maintainers charged with keeping the few CSAR/PR aircraft flyable.²⁵

The second cause of delayed aircraft and other needed parts was the Turks’ reluctance to issue fuel to large aircraft at Diyarbakir. For that reason (and because the Rescue force was too small to warrant regular airlift to its location), some, if not many, US airlifters flew into Incirlik instead, meaning that the parts had to be trucked from there to Diyarbakir. As the Turkish truck drivers who transported the parts worked a fairly relaxed schedule, including no weekend duty, the Americans were exasperated at the time it took for the trip of about 350 miles.²⁶

In July 2016, a coup on the part of Turkish military personnel failed in its attempt to overthrow the regime of President Erdoğan. In the coup’s aftermath, the Turkish leader, increasingly authoritarian and aggressively Islamic in tone, detained thousands of suspected plotters or government dissidents. Perhaps just as critical from the US perspective, the government crackdown also called into question the coalition’s ability to use Turkish air bases in the fight against ISIS. By August, the new 1ERQG commander, Col Stephen R. Moyes, took steps toward relocating the Rescue group from Diyarbakir to Erbil, because the Turks had become so difficult to work with. One arbitrary, unworkable requirement (at least for CSAR/PR) the Turks sought to enforce was a one-hour notification before any US sortie was flown. In another situation that actually highlighted the Turks’ more favorable view of USAF Rescue than strike assets, Moyes recalled cases of US aircraft that resorted to unauthorized borrowing of Diyarbakir-based Rescue aircraft call signs in order to gain entry into Turkish airspace by Turkish air traffic control (traditional strike aircraft call signs were unlikely to be allowed entry). Moyes’ proposed move was turned off only when a senior Turkish officer contacted senior US officials in Washington.²⁷

As part of Erdoğan’s crackdown, three months after the coup he ordered an American pastor who had served his Turkish congregation quietly in Turkey for more than two decades, Andrew C. Brunson, arrested on frivolous terrorism charges, increasing the tensions between Istanbul and Washington. Brunson remained in prison for the next 21 months, before being moved to house arrest in mid-2018, by which time his highly publicized predicament (Turkey also held other Americans) threatened to derail Turkey’s plans to receive a large number of F-35 stealth fighters from the United States, in addition to other economic sanc-

tions imposed by a displeased Pres. Donald Trump. Brunson was released in October 2018, but his two-year ordeal was an excellent example of how an unwarranted domestic action by a US ally, seemingly without ramification for US policy at the time, could evolve into a major issue between the two countries.²⁸

Ayn al Asad the Primary CSAR/PR Base, 2016–2017

USAFCENT and JPRC planners had looked toward the former Iraqi air base at Ayn al Asad as a possible deployed location for personnel recovery assets. In late 2016, some 600 additional US troops flowed into the base to support the fight to recapture Mosul (achieved in July 2017). In October 2016, Rescue personnel arrived at Ayn al Asad and established Operating Location-Alpha (OL-A), 1ERQG. The two deployed HC-130J tankers were based at Diyarbakir while the Guardian Angel force was divided between the northern and southern bases. From then until early 2018, when the 1ERQG departed Diyarbakir, CJTF-OIR boasted six HH-60Gs: three at Ayn al Asad and three at Diyarbakir. It had taken two years to obtain a total of six Pave Hawks dedicated to OIR. However, given that the HH-60Gs needed to be within 200 miles from a pickup site for a reasonable chance of success, the moving of the front lines farther away from the northern base, Diyarbakir, ensured that Ayn al Asad became the primary helicopter base from the day it opened (Diyarbakir to Mosul was about 200 nautical miles).²⁹

When the 1ERQG's southern element opened at Ayn al Asad, the front lines were some 40 miles away. Rescue personnel lived in a tent city on the base, and working conditions were difficult, especially for the maintainers. But within several months, successful coalition air-ground operations—including in January 2017 the highest number of weapons released monthly in OIR air strikes to date (3,600)—pushed the front farther to the south and west. Meanwhile, the build-up at Ayn al Asad provided Rescue personnel with the relative luxury of permanent structures for working, housing, and dining. (Prior to the US withdrawal in 2011, US Marines called the base “Camp Cupcake” for its amenities, including high-quality dining and fitness centers.) A hardened aircraft parking area in the immediate vicinity meant that all of OL-A's essentials were no more than a quarter mile away. By the first half of 2017, the front approached the town of Al-Qa'im near the Euphrates River as it crossed the Iraq–Syria border. By mid-year, ISIS had lost most of the Iraqi territory it once occupied and one-half of its ground in Syria.³⁰

The practice of *ground laagering*, whereby helicopters took off from their base heading toward the front and, somewhere en route, landed in a remote and presumably safe area to save fuel—keeping their rotors turning—was one measure that mitigated the long distances to potential pickup areas. When US-coalition targeting was completed for a particular air tasking order's strike window, if Pave

Hawk services were not required they returned to base perhaps performing training en route if the crew was coming off alert. During his command, Colonel Moyes “bumped-up” the practice of ground laagering because ISIS’s loss of territory placed the front ever farther from Ayn al Asad. Although ISIS’s withdrawal meant Diyarbakir’s Rescue team was a lesser participant by then, Moyes considered having the Pave Hawks at two separate locations offered the 1ERQG better options in case of a mass casualty event or a bad weather incident.³¹

Even six Pave Hawks dedicated to OIR did not allow Rescue forces to relax, however. One pararescue instructor, MSgt David B. Schumacher, tasked with preparing new pararescue personnel for the theater, commented that instructors had to teach their students to plan for quicker pickups than in past conflicts: “Our response time, depending on where somebody punched out . . . was substantially smaller” than historically had been the case. A combat rescue officer, Capt Nicholas L. Sola, who deployed for OIR in 2017, added, “They [ISIS] don’t have rules, and they know that we do,” making a rapid response on the part of CSAR/PR forces an absolute requirement.³²

As Colonel Brunner and others indicated, Diyarbakir became “less relevant” over time, because it was so far away from the fighting. If Ayn Al Asad had not been packed with aircraft and other services’ forces such as the Marine Corps, which claimed much of the airfield’s pavement for a forward operating base, CSAR/PR planners might have tried moving the Diyarbakir-based helicopters there. In 2018, one Pave Hawk pilot who deployed in late 2016, Capt Timothy G. Wisner, expressed, “We were in Diyarbakir for way too long.” Thankfully, no other US-coalition aircraft were downed, nor were there any known incidents of isolated personnel that required air assets for their recovery.³³

The A-10 Sandy Perspective on CSAR

Although the A-10s at Incirlik were tasked daily against ISIS targets, the pilots included CSAR procedures in every pre-mission briefing. Each shift of A-10s included CSAR-qualified pilots, and the possibility of a combat rescue was never very far from their thoughts. Given ISIS’s butchering of its captives, CSAR/PR personnel experienced a heightened motivation to ensure no US-coalition Airman fell into the terrorists’ hands. One A-10C pilot, Capt Sean T. Westrick, a CSAR-qualified Sandy-3 at the time he deployed in 2016 as a member of the 75th Fighter Squadron, expressed the mind-set of many of his squadron mates: “If you get captured, you’re not going to come back. . . . My game plan [was], I’m not going to get captured.” If his wingman went down, Westrick’s first action was going to be to contact one of the several entities that could “talk to the helos and

get those guys moving,” while at the same time keeping his wingman in sight, prepared to neutralize the area if enemy forces approached him.³⁴

One year later, Major Michael Dumas, an A-10 Sandy-1 instructor pilot who deployed to Incirlik, described the attitude of his squadron mates this way: “If somebody gets out of their airplane, we *have* to pick them up. We *have* to be the first ones there. . . . which makes sense, obviously, especially based on the enemy.” Dumas’ squadron commander, Lt Col Craig L. Morash, agreed, recalling their goal was an immediate pickup for any downed Airman, because there was no expectation that a pilot would survive capture by the enemy. In Morash’s words, their CSAR/PR planning involved “timetables of minutes” should a pilot hit the ground. Major Dumas observed that basic position was not merely the attitude shared by many individual members in the Rescue community; it was the published CSAR standard for the operation.³⁵

A planned timetable of minutes was often at odds with the realities of CSAR/PR helicopter basing, however. Colonel Morash noted his squadron’s pilots realistically could not expect a Pave Hawk to be overhead in much less than an hour, given the most likely areas for a pilot to be forced to leave his jet by mid-late 2017. By that time, the heaviest fighting was southeast of Raqqa along the Euphrates River (Raqqa was retaken in October 2017), and the friend-or-foe status of some ground forces in the area had become murky at best. In a 2018 interview, Morash recalled, “There was no clear coalition at that point, at least on the ground.”³⁶

In discussing the morale factor of a commitment to rescue US-coalition Airmen, Major Dumas was confident that, at least within the USAF’s culture, the expectation of friendly Rescue forces making a major effort to retrieve a downed compatriot had long been established and could hardly be increased. But, if for any reason “we were to prove that we can’t go get our own people, that would be an incredible detriment to morale overall.” He added, “The pride that we as A-10 pilots have in the mission of CSAR is incredible,” a view echoed by others. Two years after his deployment, Captain Westrick expressed the same opinion that the Air Force Rescue community had stated many times in conflicts before 2001 as well as after: US Airmen “can put their neck out there a little bit more than maybe any other country . . . because they know . . . we’re going to do everything in our power to come out there and pick them up and bring them home.”³⁷

Conclusion

Pride in the USAF’s CSAR mission had been established in Korea and rediscovered in Southeast Asia a decade later.³⁸ Since then, every major conflict, as well as some of lesser scale or duration, had provided occasion for Rescue or special operations rotary-wing crews to perform their art.

However, for a six-month period beginning in August 2014, US-coalition Airmen who engaged in combat over ISIS-held or denied territory in Iraq–Syria were left at high risk. Even if PR doctrine was not violated after September 2014, nevertheless, contrary to US military tradition, history, and, arguably, what the JPRA called “the moral imperative of PR,” it was February 2015 before CJTF-OIR provided *dedicated* CSAR/PR assets with a reasonable chance of getting to a downed pilot in time to save him.³⁹ The lack of a dedicated personnel recovery force realistically within reach of a downed aviator during that period must be judged a failure on the part of USAF, Pentagon, and USCENTCOM senior leadership, regardless of the fact that the Obama administration took an offhanded approach to OIR for at least a year. In the year OIR began, Lt Gen Daniel Bolger, US Army, retired, wrote that every US military casualty from Iraq and Afghanistan had been recovered, in keeping with what he called a “blood oath to bring everyone home.”⁴⁰

The CSAR/PR lapse in Inherent Resolve’s early going allowed for operational situations that threatened to violate that oath. Four years later, one USAF colonel—well-placed in 2014—had this to say:

It was one thing when you say, “Hey, I need a 12-ship of F-16s . . . we gotta hit some more targets,” and for the Air Force to say, “I know that, but we really don’t have a squadron to give you, they’re doing something else, a higher priority.” . . . Got it. But when you say, “I need PR, ‘cuz I’m flying in an area where if [an] aircrew hops out of a plane he’s gonna get skinned alive,” I don’t know how anybody in the Air Force can say, “Hey, sorry, you can’t have that.”⁴¹

In one rescue attempt in December 1969, a total of 336 sorties were flown in support of one F-4 navigator downed near Tchepone, Laos. One pararescueman died, several others were wounded. Of 10 helicopters damaged in the operation, five never flew again. As noted airpower historian Earl H. Tilford, Jr., wrote, “Yet no one asked if the life of one man was worth all the effort.” The question was unnecessary. That was at the far end of the spectrum, as most rescue missions required less effort. However, more than 40 years later, the question of *how much effort* remained unanswered for a new generation of those in the CSAR/PR business. Between 8 August and mid-September 2014, CJTF-OIR lacked a dedicated combat rescue or personnel recovery capability, and for the next five months the expected time (at least three hours) for OIR’s dedicated PR forces to reach a downed Airman gave pause to planners and fliers alike. Only after a coalition pilot was downed and killed in a horrific manner did the PR posture improve to offer other Airmen a reasonably good chance of recovery. In short, the situation required a different, and distasteful question to be asked—unblinkingly—by

military professionals: how much effort did a pinprick military operation warrant for potential combat rescues that senior leadership hardly anticipated?⁴²

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Notes

1. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, interview by the author, Davis Monthan AFB, AZ, 11 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2793); *Personnel Recovery Operations*, 13; and Lt Col Aaron B. Griffith, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 22 October 2018.

2. OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, interview by the author, Randolph AFB, TX, 24 August 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2783); and OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, 11 September 2018.

3. One option available to the USCENTCOM commander was to register a “non-concur” with the CJCS or the Secretary of Defense with respect to the decision to source a particular Request for Forces (RFF). A document search at the Office of the Secretary of Defense Executive Archive for unclassified documentation produced during 2014 pertaining to the sourcing of CSAR/PR assets for OIR produced negative results.

4. Emails, “RE: question – OIR, Jan 2015,” Lt Col Aaron B. Griffith (USAF), to author, 4 January and 7 January 2019; and Nolan Peterson, “What ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Iraq Looks Like,” *Daily Signal*, 22 September 2015.

5. Abe Greenwald, “On His Watch,” *Commentary*, 14 December 2015; and Fred Shepherd, “Up in the Air,” *Armada International*, April 2015, 13.

6. David Welna, “After A Year Of Bombing ISIS, U.S. Campaign Shows Just Limited Gains,” *NPR.org*, 7 August 2015; Peterson, “What ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Iraq Looks Like”; Mark Thompson, “U.S. Bombing of ISIS Oil Facilities Showing Progress,” *Time*, 13 December 2015; Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., “Airstrikes Up in Iraq & Syria, Afghanistan Eats ISR: CENTCOM,” *breakingdefense.com*, 20 July 2016; and Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019.

7. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, 11 September 2018; “CSAR Unit Activates for Iraq and Syria,” 8 September 2015; Jeff Schogol, “Air Force Search-and-Rescue Crew Deploys to Turkey,” *Air Force Times*, 1 October 2015. The pararescuemen were also referred to as “Guardian Angel” forces, an allusion to the traditional Air Rescue emblem that featured an angel holding the globe.

8. In fact, it was three months later (October 2016) when a second element of three HH-60G’s deployed to Ayn Al Asad AB, Iraq, providing the CSAR force with a southern base in addition to Diyarbakir. OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018. Colonel Smith commented on USAFCENT’s desire for both northern and southern bases for PR assets; see OHI, Col Dustin P. Smith, USAF, ret., interview by the author, Shaw AFB, SC, 6 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2792).

9. OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018. Roberts’ recollection regarding the paring down to one UTC was confirmed by USAFCENT documentation; see CD entitled

“CSAR files,” by USAFCENT/HO, 9 October 2018. Following the decision to provide one, rather than two, unit type codes [CSAR/PR ‘packages’] under Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-OIR, any documentation addressing a “non-concur” on the part of the USCENTCOM commander to the CJCS or the Secretary of Defense—if it existed—was unknown to this writer.

10. Peterson, “What ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Iraq Looks Like.”

11. Valerie Insinna, “Structural Issues Plague US Pave Hawk Helicopters,” *defensenews.com*, 20 February 2018.

12. Kyle Rempfer, “After Flying beyond Their Service Life, Air Force Pave Hawks Are Finally Getting Replaced,” *Air Force Magazine*, 17 August 2018.

13. OHI, Maj Paul A. Campbell, USAF, interview by the author, Little Rock AFB, AR, 16 August 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2781); and OHI, Capt Stephen D. Weigel, USAF, interview by the author, Maxwell AFB, AL, 14 August 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2780).

14. Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019; and OHI, SMSgt Mark W. Aube, USAF, and MSgt Marcus J. Sydow, USAF, interview by the author, 11 September 2018, Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2795).

15. OHI, Capt Timothy G. Wiser, USAF, interview by the author, Nellis AFB, NV, 13 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2796); MFR, author to self, “Follow-on to OHI with Capt Timothy G. Wiser, USAF, on 13 Sep 18,” 17 September 2018; OHI, SSgt Rachel K. Watts, USAF, interview by the author, 5 September 2018, Shaw AFB, SC (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2791); and OHI, Mr. Steven P. Kelley, USAFCENT/PR, interview by the author, 5 September 2018, Shaw AFB, SC (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2788).

16. Rempfer, “After Flying beyond Their Service Life”; and Rachel Loftis, “823rd MXS Vital to World-wide Rescue Operations,” *99th Air Base Wing Public Affairs*, 13 February 2015.

17. OHI, Lt Col Mark A. Redfern, USAF, interview by the author, 28 August 2018, Moody AFB, GA (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2785); and Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, e-mail to the author, “RE: status of CSAR paper,” 24 January 2019.

18. OHI, Lt Col Mark A. Redfern, USAF, 28 August 2018; and Lt Col Mark A. Redfern, USAF, e-mail to the author, “RE: CSAR/PR in OIR study,” 16 October 2018. An F-16 unit deployed to Incirlik not long before the 75th’s arrival, and the preparations for supporting bombing aircraft were incomplete.

19. OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018; OHI, Maj John S. Graham Sr., USAF, interview by the author, 8 August 2018, Maxwell AFB, AL (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2779); Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, e-mail to the author, “RE: status of CSAR paper,” 24 January 2019. TSgt David S. Jones, a USAF SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) specialist who deployed for OIR in 2017, noted that whereas Air Force personnel typically think only of CSAR assets in terms of rescue or recovery of friendly personnel, the US Army has extensive Personnel Recovery (PR) capabilities and does not hesitate to use any kind of vehicle to effect a recovery. Of course, an Airman downed behind enemy lines or in denied territory required more than what the Army could provide: PR is not CSAR; *see* OHI, TSgt David S. Jones, USAF, interview by the author, 5 September 2018, Shaw AFB, SC (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2789).

20. Editorial Staff in Aviation, "A Small U.S. Passenger Plane Makes Crash Landing in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Ekurd Daily*, 5 March 2016; "U.S. Army Plane Crashes in Iraq, Four Crew Uninjured: Pentagon," *Reuters*, 8 March 2016; Dan Lamothe, "Navy and Air Force Launch Helicopter Rescue Mission for Downed Plane in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 8 March 2016; OHI, Maj John S. Graham Sr., USAF, 8 August 2018; OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018; OHI, Col Dustin P. Smith, USAF, ret., 6 September 2018; Memo, "Command Operations Report," Commanding Officer, Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron FIVE [HSC-5], to Director, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC, 8 March 2017, with attachment (copy at AFHRA); and Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, e-mail to the author, "RE: status of CSAR paper," 24 January 2019.

21. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, 11 September 2018; OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018; OHI, Maj. Paul A. Campbell, USAF, 16 August 2018; Kilic Kanat and Kadir Ustun, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2015), 88; and *Personnel Recovery Operations*, 21.

22. Karl Vick, "Why Kobani Matters," *Time*, 3 November 2014; and Kanat and Ustun, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," 91.

23. OHI, Maj Paul A. Campbell, USAF, 16 August 2018; and OHI, Col. Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, 24 August 2018.

24. OHI, Maj Paul A. Campbell, USAF, 16 August 2018; OHI, DATA MASKED (USAF), August 2018; OHI, Capt Timothy G. Wiser, USAF, 13 September 2018; OHI, Lt Col Craig L. Morash, USAF, interview by the author, 28 August 2018, Moody AFB, GA (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2784); and Maj. Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019. A few of the many reports detailing Turkish attacks against the Kurds included the following: "Turkish Warplanes Hit Kurdish Militia in Syria," *Kuwait Times*, 28 August 2016; John Davison, "Turkish Jets Strike Kurdish Fighters in Syria, Iraq's Sinjar," *World News*, 25 April 2017; and Mark C. Toner, "Department Press Briefing – April 25, 2017" [transcript], US Department of State, Diplomacy in Action.

25. OHI, SMSgt Mark W. Aube, USAF, and MSgt Marcus J. Sydow, USAF, 11 September 2018; and OHI, Capt Stephen D. Weigel, USAF, 14 August 2018.

26. OHI, SMSgt Mark W. Aube, USAF, and MSgt Marcus J. Sydow, USAF, 11 September 2018; and Schogol, "Air Force Search-and-Rescue Crew."

27. Col Stephen R. Moyes, USAF, personal discussion with author, 12 December 2018, Pentagon, Arlington, VA; and OHI, Col Dustin P. Smith, USAF, ret., 6 September 2018. Colonel Moyes commanded the 1ERQG from o/a 1 July 2016 to June 2017.

28. Lara Seligman, "Trump Blocks Fighter Jet Transfer Amid Deepening U.S.-Turkey Rift," *Foreign Policy*, 13 August 2018; and Joe Gould, "Pastor Freed in US-Turkey Row That Snared F-35 Program," *Defense News*, 12 October 2018.

29. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, 11 September 2018; OHI, Capt Timothy G. Wiser, USAF, 13 September 2018; and Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. Plans Big Military Expansion at Iraq's al Asad Air Base," *Military Times*, 28 September 2016.

30. Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019; Slide, "Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2012-2017 Airpower Statistics, Operation Inherent Resolve," *USAFCENT (CAOC) Public Affairs*, 30 June 2017 (copy at AFHRA); "Inherent Resolve Strikes Target ISIL in Syria, Iraq," *DoD News*, 21 January 2017; Tilghman, "U.S. Plans Big Military Expansion." Al-Qa'im was situated on the Iraq-Syria border roughly midway between the Iraq-Syria-Turkey border to the north and the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border to

the south. An excellent overview of the campaign against ISIS is “Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps,” *BBC News*, 28 March 2018.

31. Col Gregory A. Roberts, USAF, e-mail to the author, “Re: Ground-laagering,” 19 September 2018; OHI, Capt Timothy G. Wisner, USAF, 13 September 2018; Col Stephen R. Moyes, USAF, personal discussion with author, 12 December 2018; Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019; and Peterson, “What ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Iraq Looks Like.” A mass casualty incident could be difficult to respond to, considering there were seven crew members on a single HH-60G: two pilots, two special mission aviators, and three Guardian Angel/PJs; see OHI, TSgt Emmanuel R. Martinez, USAF, interview by the author, 13 September 2018, Nellis AFB, NV (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2797).

32. OHI, Capt Nicholas L. Sola, USAF, and MSgt David B. Schumacher, USAF, interview by the author, 11 September 2018, Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2794).

33. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner, USAF, 11 September 2018; OHI, Capt. Timothy G. Wisner, USAF, 13 September 2018; and Maj. Thaddeus L. Ronnau, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 8 January 2019.

34. OHI, Capt Sean T. Westrick, USAF, interview by the author, 28 August 2018, Moody AFB, GA (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2786); and OHI, Lt Col Craig L. Morash, USAF, 28 August 2018.

35. OHI, Maj Michael R. Dumas, USAF, interview by the author, Maxwell AFB, AL, 8 August 2018 [emphasis in original] (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2778); and OHI, Lt Col Craig L. Morash, USAF, 28 August 2018. Starting in October 2015, an USAF A-10 squadron has been stationed at Incirlik AB; see Dan Lamothe, “U.S. Planes Grounded at Key Turkish Air Base in Fight against ISIS after Coup Attempt,” *Washington Post*, 16 July 2016. KC-135 tankers and unmanned aircraft have also been based at Incirlik.

36. OHI, Lt Col Craig L. Morash, USAF, 28 August 2018. Even prior to mid-2017, one A-10 pilot estimated the expected time for a Pave Hawk to reach a downed Airman, typically, was roughly 30–60 minutes from notification; for early 2016, see OHI, Capt Sean T. Westrick, USAF, 28 August 2018. From his 2017 deployment, Colonel Morash agreed, adding, however, that an hour was “a lifetime” in that situation.

37. OHI, Maj Michael R. Dumas, USAF, 8 August 2018; and OHI, Capt Sean T. Westrick, USAF, 28 August 2018.

38. This rediscovery was necessary because in 1958 Headquarters USAF had removed the wartime mission of the Air Rescue Service, wrongly viewing combat rescue as an extension of peacetime rescue; see Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1975* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 34.

39. Lee Pera, Paul D. Miller, and Darrel Whitcomb, “Personnel Recovery: Strategic Importance and Impact,” *Air & Space Power Journal* 26, no. 6 (November–December 2012), 105.

40. Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 428.

41. OHI, DATA MASKED (USAF), September 2018.

42. Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia*, 119–20. Readers should keep in mind that although the MV-22’s flight time from launch to the expected target area was close to three hours, it was likely to take at least 30 minutes from the isolating incident prior to launch.

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