

The 1980 Iranian Disastrous Rescue Attempt

In the third week of February 1980, my HC-130H Rescue crew was activated off of alert in order to fly to Keflavik Iceland. We spent a month there on continuous rescue alert. By the end of March, we were sent to Mendenhall Air Base in England where we sat active rescue alert for the next month. Finally on 23 April 1980, my crew was ordered to depart for a makeshift airbase in eastern Turkey. We arrived on 24 April 1980. The next day we sat aircraft alert (which means we stay on the aircraft until activated or relieved). Around 10 o'clock in the morning our crew was ordered to depart eastern Turkey as soon as possible. We left less than two hours later for an airfield in Sicily. My crew arrived back in the United States during the first week of May. We had no idea what happened during this interlude from the time we left Eglin Air Force Base until we returned. About a month later, my entire squadron was ordered into a large briefing room in order to receive a top-secret briefing from the number two man in the entire United States Air Force. He was there to explain what happened and why it happened. This is my absolute best recollection of what he said to us during that briefing which he gave in the first week of June, 1980.

General James A. Hill was a large man with an impeccably tailored uniform. I judged that he was in his late 50s or early 60's and physically fit. His dark hair had turned mostly gray, and his countenance was very serious. He looked around the room and seeing that all the security preparations were in place, said, "Seats!" All of us in the audience immediately sat down. We were extremely curious as to why a four-star general wanted to address our rescue squadron. We soon found out. The general took a few moments and looked around the room. He tried to make eye contact with every individual member of my squadron.

The general then spoke: "I am here to offer both an apology and an explanation. I know, based upon thirty-eight years of serving in uniform that sometimes you are ordered to do things that you do not understand. Most of the time, no one offers you an explanation of what might seem inexplicable orders. Normally, I would not take the time to do this, but I have personally witnessed incompetence on a scale which defies human imagination and borders on criminality. It cannot be ignored. It must be exposed for what it is.

"By this time, you all know about the colossal failure of our attempt to free the fifty-three hostages held by the Iranian government. Eight good men lost their lives needlessly. Your squadron was part of that mission, and you deserve to know why it failed and the mistakes that were made. You also deserve an apology for those of you who were put in harm's way and who had to endure three months of displacement.

"All the mistakes that were made and the colossal incompetence starts and ends with the President of the United States. I am going to explain to you why this is true. His first mistake occurred just after President Carter took office. One of his first acts as president was not replacing the H-53 helicopters. All the services have the Super Jollys in their inventory. Virtually every chief of their respective service implored the president to spend \$4.5 billion to replace these Vietnam era helicopters. When we brought these helicopters into active service in the mid-60s, the Sikorsky Company, who manufactured the Super Jolly, told the Defense Department that the shelf life of such a large helicopter with so much power would only be ten to fifteen

years at most. The stress of such a large rotary wing moving at speeds in excess of Mach 2 at the tips would cause vibrations that over time would weaken the structural integrity and would damage the instrumentation and transmission of these helicopters. The president ignored the advice of every chief of staff of their respective service and decided to spend \$1.5 billion to refit all the Super Jollys. So, instead of replacing the H-53 with the new H-60 Sikorsky helicopter, he did save the taxpayers about \$3 billion. When it came time to use them, the Super Jollys were not reliable enough to do the mission. Virtually every one of them, except Marine One, suffered battle damage in Vietnam. The normal reliability rate of the Super Jolly was less than 15% of all those that still remained in service. The mission called for six of the ten Super Jollys employed to be on station and operational over our embassy at the time of the raid. We actually had five able to go which was three times greater than the normal reliability rate for that particular weapon system.

“The second reason why the mission failed goes back again to the President of the United States. His goal over what he hoped would be two terms in office was to unite all the services and combine them into one military. He wanted to eliminate service rivalries, so he insisted that helicopters be used from every service. Unfortunately, the only in-flight refueling capable H-53 helicopter was operated by the United States Air Force. All four chiefs told the president that only the Air Force HH-53 choppers should be used, as they could be refueled in the air. He personally denied this request, so we were forced to plan a land-based refueling event in the mission sequence. That one decision led to the death of eight good men. I'll talk more to that point later.

“The third reason that the mission failed was when it was scheduled. Again, all the chiefs recommended a December timeframe. The perfect time was December 21, the winter solstice, which gave the raiders the maximum amount of night time and reduced the amount of daylight available to the defenders. During that time, the Iranian weather system is controlled by the Siberian high which would allow you to fly in cold stable air and would greatly reduce the potential wind and dust damage caused by greater surface winds. It took him months to make a decision. President Carter finally decided to go in April when the area is dominated by Coriolis storms. At this time of the year, the sun crosses the equator. That solar movement creates large atmospheric pressure changes which result in vast areas of excessive wind. That, in turn, causes both sand and dust storms in the very area that we had to fly. Three, possibly four, of the five helicopters unable to complete the mission were made inoperative by these excessive sand storms.

“The last reason was the most egregious of all. I am referring to command-and-control errors. The President of the United States insisted that he, and he alone, would control the mission from the White House. Special satellite and HF links were put in place to allow him to make changes in the plan in order to compensate for any unseen and unplanned problems. The events that occurred are the perfect example of Murphy's Law: If it can go wrong, it will! Virtually every military doctrine that I know dictates that operational and tactical decisions be made at the lowest possible level. The President of the United States, an academy graduate of Annapolis, who learned this doctrine as a midshipman, chose to ignore it. The same Coriolis storms which took down our helicopters also created gaps in his ability to communicate with the forces in theater. One helicopter pilot needed a special clearance to continue the mission, and since he was

unable to reach command-and-control, he aborted his part of the mission. The only one authorized to grant him such a clearance was the President and at that point, he was unable to communicate with this vital portion of the mission.

“Compare our attempt at rescue to the Israeli raid to free the Entebbe hostages. The Israeli high command presented a plan to Prime Minister Golda Meir. She approved it at once and turned over all operational control to the on-scene commander, Lt. Col. Netanyahu. He practiced for two or three days and then executed the mission. The only casualty was Lt. Col. Netanyahu. All the hostages were returned safely. Mrs. Meir might not have graduated from the academy, but she's a much better military leader than our president. She found someone she could trust and turned over the mission to him. That's real leadership.

“Now, about the loss of life. What I am about to tell you is our best conjecture of what happened during the early morning hours of April 25 in the Iranian desert. As I told you before, we could not use the Air Force HH-53's because the president wanted helicopters from every service to be used to complete the mission. So, in order to refuel, each Super Jolly had to be directed to a position besides the C-130 which was the on-scene tanker. Each chopper took its turn to refuel while the others waited. It was pitch black out there. An airman was placed on the ground facing the choppers lined up to be refueled. Because we had to keep secret our presence in the Iranian desert, the use of any kind of illumination could not be allowed as it would be seen for many miles giving away our position. The only light used was done by a loadmaster facing the front of the Jollys. This airman used dimmed, red-tinted flashlights to direct the helicopters in order to enable each Jolly to get close enough to be refueled. *We think* that a sand insect bit this airman's neck. He went to flick the insect off his neck, forgetting for the moment that the signal light was in his hand. The helicopter pilot saw the light move to his right and followed it right into the Hercules. Because of radio silence procedures, the airman had to watch in horror, as there was no way to warn the helicopter pilot of the mistake that was made. Eight men died in the ensuing explosion. That airman, who was a loadmaster, was one of those casualties. If we had used the Air Force HH-53s, we would have refueled in the air, and those men would still be alive.

“Finally, I want all of you to know that I am resigning my commission and retiring after I finish going to every unit that was involved in this tragic mission and give them the same briefing you are hearing today. I will not serve under a President that I do not respect and personally loathe. Retirement is the only honorable path left to me. I want you all to know that having served with and commanded men such as yourselves for the past thirty-eight years has been the highlight of my life. I wish you all, Godspeed. That is all!”

To paraphrase the late and great Paul Harvey, “Now you know the rest of the story!”