

## INCREDIBLE CREDIBLE SPORT

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By Steve Douglass

May, 1980. It was a dark time in U.S. history. President Carter was presiding over a huge international mess. Iran was holding 52 U.S. citizens hostage and an attempted rescue had ended in a tragic disaster that cost eight servicemen their lives.

If the tragic fate the rescuers met in the desert was not bad enough, some 7,000 miles away in Tehran something indecent and inhumane was happening to the charred corpses of the rescuers who were killed.



(Courtesy Jane's Defense Weekly)

The international press broadcast to the world the disturbing pictures of Iranian authorities ripping open the body bags containing the remains of the Delta Force commandos.

Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali, formerly Tehran's chief Islamic judge held up a portion of charred arm and shouted for the world to hear, " This is proof of Carter's crime ." and sarcastically added, "My heart aches for the families of these victims."

The now infamous failed raid not only cost American lives, and reinforced the Iranian idea that the Americans were impotent when it came to military might, but it also served to place the Iranians on a high state of alert. Any further rescue attempts would be extremely risky if not down right suicidal.

This grisly desecration scene in Tehran only served to hardened U.S. resolve. President Carter, reflecting the country's outrage at the display and desecration of American dead, said "This indicates quite clearly the kinds of people with whom we were dealing. They did not bring shame and dishonor on those fallen Americans. They brought shame and dishonor on themselves."

Although the rescue attempt was considered a dismal failure, the raid did uncover some Iranian vulnerabilities. Six helicopters and three C-130s did manage to penetrate Iran's airspace without detection. Carter called for his advisors to draw up another rescue plan. The new plan called for a bold strike using special forces and a new type of secret aircraft, A heavy-lift C-130 capable of landing and taking off like a helicopter. It was code-named "Credible Sport."

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### The Mission

To fully understand why the need for such a radical aircraft, we should first examine the initial rescue attempt.

On May, 12, 1980, eight C-130s ( three carrying 90 special forces commandos and

three carrying fuel and supplies for helicopters and two spares) took off from an airfield in Egypt.

Eight Sikorsky RH-53 helicopters, flying in pairs, lifted off the deck of the nuclear carrier Nimitz, on station in the Arabian Sea. "Phase One" called for the strike package to penetrate Iranian airspace, undetected and at low level and to meet at "Desert One" an unimproved landing strip in the great Salt Desert southeast of Tehran.

"Phase Two" called for the helicopters to ferry the special forces commandos to a mountain hideout, some 100 miles from Tehran, while the C-130s would fly on to Oman and stage and wait for nightfall.

Under the cover of darkness, the commandos would board busses and trucks (which were placed in advanced by deep cover CIA operatives) and head for a Tehran warehouse to be used as a staging area for their assault on the U.S. embassy compound (where 50 hostages were being held) and the Foreign Ministry building, where U.S. Charge d' Affairs Bruce Laingen and two other U.S. diplomats were being held captive. The warehouse had been readied in advance by a CIA agent, posing as a European businessman.

The mission called for the special forces commandos to divide into two assault teams, converge on the embassy and the Foreign ministry, scale the walls, shoot or capture the guards and rescue the hostages. The CIA was to provide the assault team with the exact location of the hostages in the embassy compound. Meanwhile, four of the choppers were to land on the embassy's soccer field. The hostages, and the assault team would board the helicopters and fly to "Desert Two" another desert airstrip, where they would meet the waiting C-130s to transport them to safety. The helicopters would be left on the ground, destroyed if the assault team had time.

All during the rescue, Navy fighters from the carriers Nimitz and Coral Sea would fly a combat patrol along the Iranian border, ready to dart in and render assistance if Iran tried to pursue. Would the plan have worked? We'll never know. The mission met with disaster on the first phase of the attack.

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#### Desert One

The mission seemed to be jinxed from the start. Just hours before the mission was to begin, a sailor accidentally hit a fire control switch, dousing five of the RH-53 helicopters with sea water and foam. The aircraft were cleaned and inspected with no obvious damage found.

As the helicopters flew at low level (in an attempt to avoid being detected on radar) enroute to Desert One, they encountered a severe sandstorm. An electrical power supply on one helicopter overheated, knocking out the gyro compass, horizon indicator and the cockpit lights. The crew aborted back to the Nimitz, landing with fuel tanks dangerously close to empty.

On another helicopter, a warning light signaled that the chopper's 34 ft. long rotor blade was failing. It was forced to land. On inspection the rotor was found to be cracked. The crew, quickly gathering up all of the classified materials boarded one of the other mission helicopters and pressed on.

Strike three came when a pump that propels one of the helicopter's backup hydraulic system failed. The helicopter flew on to "Desert One" but was taken out of service. It was here where the, mission commander, Charles Beckwith made the decision to abort.

Colonel Beckwith, an honest-to-god American war hero, conferred with his on-site commander, Air Force Colonel, James Kyle. Climbing down from the sick bird, Kyle said, "Sir, my recommendation is that we abort."

Beckwith knew the mission counted on at least six functioning helicopters to work. Five just wouldn't do it. "Would you consider taking five (helicopters) and going ahead? Kyle asked, knowing there was a real possibility that the mission might still go on. "Think before you answer me. You are the guy who has to shoulder this." he advised his superior officer.

Beckwith was smart enough to know when he had been presented with a no-win situation. After mulling over how much was riding on his decision and it might be a possible to try the mission again when the odds were in his favor, Beckwith blurted out the only logical yet disappointing answer. " There's just no way."

Beckwith notified the pentagon via a secure FLTSATCOM link. They agreed. The choppers started up and the C-130s began to taxi. Beckwith recalled what happened next. "I was aboard a C-130 looking out a window and all of a sudden a 130 exploded. It was one hell of a fire. On that 130 were 39 of my people. "

A departing helicopter had crashed into the taxing C-130. Beckwith said, " There was no way to get the bodies out of the fire, unless you wanted to burn up everybody who's going in there. The war hardened veteran of Viet Nam, sat there and cried.

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#### Hard lessons learned

At home the mission was dissected by Congress, the Pentagon and the military. Hard questions were asked, accusations were made and Iran paraded the fallen soldier's bodies as trophy's of a terrorist war. Carter stood behind his decision to mount a rescue operation despite the barrage of criticisms from armchair strategists and Monday morning quarterbacks. "It was a fine operation that everyone believed had a good chance for success, he argued. "There's a deeper failure than that of an incomplete success, and that is the failure to attempt a worthy effort, a failure to try.

Meanwhile the investigations into the failed rescue attack produced a few answers. Hind sight being 20/20, everyone involved thought the mission ultimately failed because of bad luck, mechanical failures and just being too damn complicated. Too many commands and too many commanders conceived a plan that was just too complex and dependant on everything functioning perfectly.

Pentagon planners surmised that what was needed was a simpler plan not involving the whole U.S. military. As Beckwith had pointed out before the mission, a small elite force of commandos who could get in and get out with a minimum of support would and should work.

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#### Enter Credible Sport

Was it possible to mount another rescue attempt? What would it take and how many men were questions the Pentagon began asking it's military think tanks. Iran had reacted to the raid by dispersing some of the hostages, but if they could be located by CIA operatives and if commandos could get in and out easily and as simply as possible, a plan might be feasible.

Military strategists examined other successful hostage rescue raids and in particular, the Israeli's raid on Entebbe. In the daring raid, the Israelis, landed

at the Entebbe airport in C-130s, commandos attacked their jailers and freed the hostages, loaded them on the transports and were back in Israeli airspace before anyone knew what had happened. What was needed was an Entebbe style raid.

Tehran was not Entebbe, planners pointed out. The Entebbe hostages were being held in a building adjacent to the airport, the Tehran hostages were being held at the U.S. Embassy and several other locations. The closest airport to the embassy compound was Tehran airport, and landing a U.S. commando force there was out of the question.

The closest thing to a landing spot near the embassy was the embassy soccer field. In the original raid, the soccer field was to be used as an LZ for the helicopters, but helicopters were ruled in any future out because they had proven unreliable in the failed first attempt.

Somebody, somewhere in the black world had a brainstorm. Could a C-130 be modified to land in a soccer field with thirty foot obstructions at both ends and could the same aircraft take off from such a field? If it could, then a second rescue attempt just might be possible.

The commandos could be on those special C-130s. They could land right next to the embassy, locate and free the hostages and take off without ever going near the Tehran airport. Such a small field could be easily defended and the site of a vertical landing C-130 gunship filled with armed-to-the-teeth commandos would most likely make even the most hardened terrorist think twice about a confrontation. It sounded far fetched, but maybe, just maybe it could work. All that was needed was to turn a huge C-130 Hercules into a helicopter.



The plane had rockets to stop it in a short distance (Courtesy Jane's Defense Weekly)

Necessity is the mother of invention.

When the military needs to pull off the impossible they call Lockheed. Then under secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, William Perry did just that and Credible Sport was born.

The program goal? To modify three C-130s to be able to land on a football sized field obstructed by two 33 foot structures on both ends and to be able to take off, fully loaded with troops passengers and supplies from the same field.

Dr. Perry had the Air Force provide three C-130H airframes and \$25M for each aircraft to be modified by Georgia, Lockheed.

The extensive modifications to the aircraft included:

1. A terrain following radar borrowed from the A-7 Corsair II
2. Chin-mounted FLIR (Forward Looking Infrared) sensors integrated with a navigation computer.

3. Dorsal and horsal extensions (rudder and elevator leading edge extensions at fuselage junction)
  
4. Flap and aileron extensions (for better low speed handling)
  
5. Avionics package to provide glide-path guidance.
  
6. Rocket motors to aid takeoff and landing performance: 8 Mk-6s for takeoff thrust, 8 SHRIKE motors to reduce landing rate of sink, 8 forward facing ASROC motors for deceleration, 6 ASROC motors for pitch/yaw control.

Other modifications included storing the forward facing rocket motors behind aerodynamic fairings while in flight.

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From the shopping list of spare parts needed for Credible Sport, it's mission was obvious. Fly at low level using the terrain following radar to avoid detection. Fly at night using the chin mounted FLIR to locate the landing field. A steep approach and descent to the LZ would be controlled by the forward firing the rockets slowing any forward motion to almost zero.

The powerful SHRIKE rocket motors would control rate of sink and land the huge cargo aircraft like a spaceship touching down on the moon. Six ASROC rocket motors would dampen pitch and yaw.

After the commandos had completed their mission they would board the C-130s and blast their way out in much the same way they came in.

Once at altitude, normal propelled horizontal flight would resume.

Just imagine it. A huge lumbering C-130 Hercules, spitting fire and rocket exhaust and landing like Harrier. It seemed impossible.

And yet it worked. The first successful flight test occurred on Sept. 18, 1980 only 60 or so days after modifications were begun. Video tape taken of the test showed the C-130 firing its rockets and making a rough but successful landing in the space required. The go ahead was given to modify two more C-130s for a total of three Credible Sport (then renamed "Coronet Bat") aircraft.

But then disaster struck. On October 29, 1980 as the first prototype was on a test approach and landing one of the SHRIKE rocket motors fired prematurely, ripping off the left wing.

The aircraft hit the ground hard and came apart in a spectacular fireball. Luckily the cockpit was severed from the rest of the aircraft throwing the pilots clear of the burning plane. Both were injured but survived the crash.

The crash was the death nail for Credible Sport. The program was cancelled not much later.

Good thing it was. The Iranians scattered the hostages and hid them in eight different locations making a rescue next to impossible.

But what to do about the hostages? They were still being held against their will and used as pawns in a dangerous political game. The American public, outraged that the situation was dragging on and on, demanded closure. Surely it was better to try something, no matter how dangerous than do nothing at all?

As history records, doing nothing was the best thing to do. The elections came and went and Carter (a dove) was replaced by Reagan, who was known to be a hawk and staunch supporter of the military. An inside joke began circulating through the halls of power. "What's flat and glows in the dark? Iran after Reagan takes office." Obviously the joke wasn't funny to the Iranians. The day Reagan was sworn into office, the hostages were released.

Although the military abandoned its idea of turning a C-130 into a STOL rescue craft, some of the modifications, such as improved night-vision capabilities, avionics and navigation equipment used on Credible Sport, would become standard equipment on future C-130 variants.

The only surviving Credible Sport C-130 can be found serving as a museum display at Warner Robbins Air Force Base in Georgia. The special C-130 could be mistaken for any other C-130 at the base if it wasn't for a non descript marker that reads "Iranian Hostage Crisis Rescue Aircraft."

But don't bother asking the military for any details about the aircraft. It's mission is still classsified.

However history may judge those times, it's still hard not to imagine what might have been if Credible Sport had been a success. Just once, this author would have liked to have seen, a massive C-130 Hercules, rockets belching flame, stop in midair and land like a harrier.

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