

2  
 ON PAGE

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# Coping with modern conflict

*FIVE YEARS AFTER THE FAILED RESCUE MISSION IN IRAN, IS THE US MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT ANY BETTER PREPARED?*

BY J. FRANCIS GLADSTONE

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ill Davis is a 43-year-old stockbroker who lives in a comfortable house in Newton. Each night he sets his alarm for just before the hour he wants to be up, whether that is 6, 7, or 8. That way he is awake enough to hear the radio news as it comes on the hour.

He remembers that on April 25, 1980, the news made him cringe. The buds on the trees outside his window and the street still dusty from winter seemed part of another, motionless world. A hoarse-voiced Jimmy Carter was on the air. A rescue had been attempted in Iran for the 53 Americans who had been held hostage in Tehran since November 4, 1979. It had been called off by the President.

Davis, like many Americans, had felt the same, sickening sensation once before, when he was much younger, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. Gradually, over the next hours, days, and weeks, the news filtered out. The rescue attempt was, it turned out, very different from the Cuban crisis. It did not take the United States to the cliff edge of nuclear war. There were no major reprisals.

In political terms, the failed rescue mission was a humiliation. Carter's apology to the Iranians, in which he said in his exhausted way that no harm was meant against Iranians individually or against Iran as a nation, was not one of America's finer moments. Yet the sight of Iranian militants peeling back the plastic bags from the bodies of dead American servicemen, of one militant poking a knife into a charred skull, was a reminder of the madness the United States was dealing with.

Five years have gone by, a lot of water under a lot of bridges. Jimmy Carter is in Plains, Georgia, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is entrenched in a war of attrition with Iraq, and the former hostages are ordinary Americans living their lives under a very different Administration. But while politics and people's lives have changed, at a military level there are still unanswered questions about why seemingly weaker enemies appear to be able to humiliate the United States. When we

think of recent events in Vietnam, Iran, and Lebanon, they may seem disparate, but there is a theme: The military might have done things better or differently. And in questioning the actions of our government and military, one needs to understand the position of a little-publicized group known as the Special Forces, or commandos, within the military establishment.

Commandos have become important elements in the armed services of several nations. In the United States, commandos, also known as the Special Operations Forces, are highly trained individuals who generally work behind the lines in small, secret missions like the Iranian hostage rescue effort. Their work may be part of a larger war, or it may be in noncombat situations such as undercover efforts seeking to curb terrorism. The Special Operations Forces, for example, reportedly were present at the Los Angeles Olympics. Last month, the *Washington Post* reported that US military and Central Intelligence Agency personnel are training antiterrorist units for foreign governments, as part of the Reagan Administration's stepped-up policy of combating terrorism around the world. The program, according to government sources, is designed to increase allied governments' abilities to thwart hos-

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J. FRANCIS GLADSTONE IS A WRITER AND FILM PRODUCER. HE RECENTLY PRODUCED *BIG WAR, SMALL WAR, A FRONTLINE DOCUMENTARY ON THE US ARMY'S ABILITY TO DEAL WITH*

hijackings, and other terrorist activities. The training has been conducted in about a dozen countries, the sources said.

The Special Forces are slightly different from commandos. They are trained to work in foreign environments, assisting Third World nations that are US allies in countering insurgencies. But because these insurgencies are often fought by guerrillas — such as the nonuniformed troops of the Viet Cong — Special Forces soldiers need many guerrilla-type, behind-the-lines, commando skills. (Because there are more similarities than differences between commandos and the Special Forces, for the purposes of this article the term Special Forces will refer to both groups.)

Members of the Special Forces are well aware of their lack of proper support within the military. Recently, someone who served with the Special Forces in Vietnam (also known as the Green Berets) remarked very apologetically, "A lot of people think we just kill babies. They think there is no moral aspect to good soldiering."

The events of April 24 and April 25, 1980, the events of Desert One, are a good illustration of what can happen when standards of soldiering are not high. Desert One was the name given to a secret hideout in the Dasht-e-Kavir (Salt Desert), about 400 miles southwest of Tehran, more than 1000 miles north of the Gulf of Oman. There, in darkness, at 10 p.m. on April 24, two Iranian generals, 12 Farsi-speaking drivers, and 118 US commandos were dropped on the ghostly salt flats by huge US Air Force C130 transport planes. The Air Force had chosen the location from an earlier reconnaissance because the desert was firm enough to support the huge planes. The disadvantage of Desert One was that although it was 40 miles from any habitation, the area was transected by a road.

Within minutes after the arrival of the Americans, a bus appeared. Such eventualities had been planned for, according to Colonel Charlie Beckwith, the combat-toughened leader of

the Army commando group, which was called Delta Force. The ancient bus was stopped, its tires were shot, and its passengers were put under guard. Then a gasoline tanker truck came by. It failed to stop on command, was fired on by an antitank weapon, and burst into flames.

The plan called for a rendezvous with Marine helicopters and then for using those helicopters to take the commandos forward to Tehran. But of the eight helicopters sent from the USS *Nimitz*, only six arrived at Desert One, and they were late, having been held up by a severe dust storm. Six was the minimum number of helicopters required to take the commandos in — and then bring them and the hostages out.

Flying helicopters low in darkness is difficult, even when pilots have extensive training and night-vision aids and when there are no dust storms. Timing was important: The plan's success depended on flying the helicopters in darkness to a site outside Tehran, picking up the hostages, and then returning before the morning light. When the six helicopters were late, the margins were being lost. Then it was discovered that another helicopter was defective. Time was running out, but five helicopters were not enough to complete the rescue. Messages went from Beckwith through senior military authorities right to President Carter. Carter accepted Beckwith's recommendation to abort the mission.

Then, as one of the helicopters was taking off, it banked and hit a fuel-loaded C130, which burst into flames that swept 300 feet high. Eight men lost their lives, and four others were severely burned. The other helicopters were abandoned. (An air strike was called in to destroy them, but that strike was never carried out.) Members of the mission returned to

a remote base in Egypt, where just the day before they had sung "God Bless America," and one of them had read the story of David and Goliath from the Bible.

In reporting these events in his book, *Delta Force*, Beckwith seems to have missed the irony of that reading. In the first book of Samuel, David slays Goliath, which is surely just what the Iranian militants did to the United States. But then this is a story of many ironies. According to *Free at Last!*, a book by Doyle McManus about the hostages' ordeal, the Pentagon had estimated that 15 of the 53 hostages might be killed in the rescue attempt, and up to 30 commandos could die. If officials acknowledged that such casualties were possible, why weren't more precautions taken?

Should the rescue attempt never have taken place? The central question it raises is whether, for all America's military might, the right hand knew what the left was doing. Did the planners behind the scenes in Washington really understand the difficulties of getting into Tehran? Did Beckwith really understand the minds of the planners?

Several senior Army officers interviewed hint as much, saying Beckwith "blinked" in the desert that night. But that's unfair. Beckwith had strict orders to abort the raid if fewer than six helicopters were available. There is much evidence that in his military career, Beckwith has shown consistent bravery under extreme duress, and all the reports on the raid show that the planning of his part was meticulous. The problem seems to be that Beckwith's was only one part.

After the raid, retired admiral James L. Holloway produced a detailed and critical report. That report does

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not single out individuals; quite the opposite. What it describes in the planning of the raid is a situation of extreme complexity. All four services were involved: The Army supplied the Special Forces; the Navy supplied the *Nimitz*; the Marines supplied the helicopters; and the Air Force chose the site of Desert One and supplied the planes. Each branch had its own intelligence service. The CIA was also involved as liaison at various levels, as were other secret agencies. Yet in the early planning stages, when Beckwith tried to find out about locks on the embassy under siege, he was faced with great difficulties. If anyone in Washington knew the answer, that person was not close enough to Beckwith. He had one chain of command; the CIA and Army Intelligence had others. Beckwith eventually got the answer by recording and analyzing network news footage of the militants at the embassy gates.

In the Pentagon, there was continuous communication among planners. But in day-to-day terms, those who would actually do the work on the ground were separated by about 2000 miles: The helicop-

ter pilots were trained in the Arizona desert, and Beckwith's commandos were trained mostly in the South.

Edward Luttwak, a military analyst working in Washington who has written widely on the Israeli army and who wrote a book on the Pentagon called *A Question of Military Reform*, thinks that this kind of separation — of high-level planners from soldiers, of commandos from pilots — was at the root of the rescue mission's problem. And, he says, this is still part of the US approach to what he calls the "commando business."

"The essence of the commando business," he says, "is simplicity."

In both England and Israel, Luttwak points out, Special Forces-type experience is a plus in an officer's career. In Israel, he notes, every senior army commander has had commando experience, and the same is true in the British army. But in the US Army, the opposite is the case. To many, the Special Forces lack prestige.

According to Luttwak, the core of the problem in 1980 and today is that the United States employs "tough-guy types" to

do the work on the ground, but the work is elaborately planned for them by people in the Pentagon who have no experience in the commando business. The result is a discrepancy between planning theory and the ability to carry it out.

"How could the number of helicopters have been so small?" one source in the British Special Forces asks, in talking about the US hostage rescue mission. "All the resources of the US were there, yet nobody realized that dust storms were a possibility and that helicopters are fragile. Why not send 20 helicopters, and send them back if not needed?" Sending more helicopters, the source adds, wouldn't have increased the risk of detection.

Says Luttwak, "It is almost as if we plan for failure." He does not mean this maliciously; his implication is that in planning the 1980 raid, inexperienced people in the Pentagon figured out on paper what would work, doing so through elaborate chains of command, and reached a critical mass by which no individual knew exactly what was happening. No one person, therefore, could say "no."

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**G**eneral Edward C. Meyer has a different explanation. Meyer understands well the workings of the Pentagon; within the military, he has probably done more than anyone to try to make his colleagues understand that in the current terrorist- and insurgent-ridden world, the United States must be ready for conflicts other than nuclear war.

Yet in a recent interview, Meyer, now retired as Army chief of staff, dismissed the failure of the raid at Desert One as "kismet." In other words, he was saying, all those involved knew the raid would be dangerous and the risk would be great.

He is not alone in seeing the Desert One fiasco as an isolated military failure. Commando operations are by definition dangerous, and in wars with many such operations, there have been many failures. But that doesn't address the question of how so many planners in the Pentagon could have taken so long to create such an elaborate plan that went so totally wrong from the start. It's possible to imagine the much-heralded Israeli raid on Entebbe failing, but it's hard to imagine that failure stemming from a lack of

United Press International



**Colonel Beckwith: His part of the mission was well planned.**  
helicopters.

Although he warns against reading too much into the Desert One failure, Meyer says that in trying to reform the Army in the late 1970s, he had gotten "tank treads all across" his chest. In those days, the Army was so mechanized and the belief in mechanization was so complete that it was almost impossible to persuade anyone that nonmechanical skills were crucial in modern war. The problem, then, was not that the United States did not have enough helicopters for Beckwith's raid; it had thousands. The problem was that no one

had the foresight to see that more than eight might be necessary.

**T**oday, Charlie Beckwith has a security business in Austin, Texas, called S.A.S. of Texas (after the British Special Air Services, with which he trained). He is every bit the John Wayne-looking Green Beret, a big man, big shouldered and big featured. He seems out of place in his office, chewing tobacco and spitting into an old coffee can in the sterile but comfortable neon-lit surroundings. But he is a modest man, a man trained to handle danger, a commander who has taken the risk of leading men into an ambush, and who knows what failure feels like. He describes himself as a doer, not a thinker. Beckwith was one of a tiny handful of officers in the US Army in the 1970s who foresaw the need for some kind of antiterrorist commando capability.

Until General Meyer came to power, Beckwith had very few allies. After Vietnam, the Army almost totally disbanded its Special Forces capability. In doing so, it may have been turning its back on the very ap-

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proach that might have helped it understand "low-intensity" war, which encompasses the Vietnam War, the Iran raid, and Lebanon, situations in which the United States was not facing all-out war on a single front.

Special Forces personnel have been trained not to rely too heavily on machines, but on stealth, skill, bravery, and cunning. The Special Forces can never win a war, but their *ideas* can make an army think differently about the human element, as opposed to the mechanical one. They understand better the limitations of military power because they work so close to the ground.

John F. Kennedy stated this idea clearly in 1962, when he addressed the graduating class at West Point. "There is another type of war," he said, "new in its intensity, ancient in its origins — war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents . . . war by ambush instead of by combat . . . seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It requires," he continued, "a wholly different kind of military training."

This rang especially true for General William P. Yarborough, commander of the Green Berets in Kennedy's time. With considerable understatement, Yarborough later wrote in the foreword to a history of the Green Berets, "These words did not prod the armed forces into changing their conventional warfare orientation in any significant way."

Part of this may be because of a general misunderstanding of who Special Forces soldiers are and what they do. John Berry, a Nebraska lawyer who was an Army counsel in Vietnam and who was familiar with the Special Forces, tells a story that sheds some light. The regular Army, he says, called the Special Forces "snake eaters" because of their ability to survive in the jungle. Once, Berry says, a group of Korean Special Forces was called in to give a demonstration of kung fu-type combat for US Special Forces. According to the story, the Koreans, thinking that this was what the US people wanted to see, produced some snakes and

began to eat them. The "snake-eater" image was reinforced then, and it has been reinforced ever since. Army publicity for the Special Forces now seems to mimic the kind of blackened-face, tough-guy image that appears on the cover of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine; in reality, Special Forces personnel, knowing the human element of war so well, living in the jungle without artillery cover, are often more sensitive than other soldiers.

Of course, the other types, the almost delinquent killer-types, the soldiers of fortune, do exist in the Special Forces. Anyone doing that kind of work must be tough. But it was because the Special Forces soldiers presented an alternative way of fighting "another type of war" that Kennedy gave them the emblematic green beret — just when the Army was trying to disband them.

**B**rian Jenkins, an authority on international terrorism with the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California, speaks of the Special Forces with some authority. He was one of the Special Forces trainers who were with the Montagnards, the mountain tribespeople who were being trained to fight the Viet Cong communists in the 1960s. The efforts did not succeed, Jenkins acknowledges, but, he says, "When the Army came in, it just did its thing. The Army had its doctrine for fighting in Europe, and it simply thought it could apply it."

When asked what the Army learned in Vietnam, he says, "Probably how to drive tanks through a rice paddy." He is not simply being sarcastic; Jenkins is one of the first to admit that the Special Forces cannot win a war. But, he points out, the Special Forces were neglected in Vietnam, pushed aside. After General William Westmoreland left, General Creighton Abrams took over as commanding general in Vietnam. He was a man with an overt dislike of the Special Forces, an old tank commander with experience dating back to World War II in Europe. After Vietnam was over, Abrams re-

vised the Army in Germany, but he also all but disbanded the US Special Forces capability.

The explanation for this may be at least partly psychological. Vietnam was a "dirty war." Because the Army assigned the Special Forces to Vietnam and because some groups sought refuge from the Army with the CIA, in the minds of many, the Special Forces were identified with this "dirty war." It is almost as if the Army, by rejecting the Special Forces, was trying to cleanse itself of the Vietnam experience.

Partly because of what happened in Iran, partly because of its ambitions for the Third World, the Reagan Administration — like Kennedy's Administration — has set about trying to revive the Special Forces. The current Administration has appointed Noel Koch, who has some background in military and intelligence affairs, as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, a euphemism for counterterrorism. Koch has a deep sense of how important it is that the United States not be humiliated, but he has also said that Army intransigence on promoting an alternative to regular front-line forces is a stumbling block to developing the Special Forces. In a recent interview, however, he took pains not to seem at odds with the Army. The prejudice, he feels, is born out of old habit, not any particular malice.

Certainly there are *more* Special Forces personnel now. (Luttwak, the analyst, notes that the increasing numbers raise another question, about financing. He is skeptical about the availability and allocation of money, pointing out that much of it has gone for elaborate equipment such as a submarine for the Navy Seals.) But if the United States does have more Special Forces personnel, they have not been used well.

For example, instead of sending soldiers with counter-terrorist training into Lebanon, the United States sent the Marines. In Lebanon, the problem was not a lack of helicopters. In October 1983, the Marine sentry guarding a post in front of

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the Marine headquarters building in Beirut was not properly armed and was therefore not able to stop the bomber whose attack resulted in the deaths of 241 men.

A commission established to study the bombing, chaired by retired admiral Robert L. J. Long, talked about the United States' inability to deal with this kind of conflict. In the case of Lebanon, the planning seemed to have been *ad hoc*: The Marines were there, in the Mediterranean, so they were sent. And when they were dead, no one was quite sure who was responsible — the Mediterranean fleet, General Bernard Rogers of NATO, or the joint command in Florida responsible for the Rapid Deployment Force. Once again, Americans paid a high price.

If the low prestige of the Special Forces is a theme of this story, so is the "can do," proud attitude of the Pentagon. From the time of Vietnam to the present, no senior military official has resigned either because he saw failure coming or because he took responsibility for it.

**T**hese days, the Special Forces have been centralized in Fayetteville, North Carolina (also known as Fayette-Nam), where Fort Bragg is located, a grim Army post amid pine barrens that suggests clandestine operations.

One comes away with powerful impressions. The officers and men in the "A" teams seem better informed on world politics than many people in the Army. They seem to understand the limitations of US military power. They understand that what they require needs long study — foreign languages, for example — and great sacrifice. Unlike the carefree heroes in James Bond-type stories, Special Forces members find that clandestine work puts great pressure on their personal lives. Divorce runs high. These people also talk about career sacrifice; the Army, they say, will not take them seriously. The public affairs officer at Fayetteville, a colonel looking forward to retirement who did not admit to having a Special Forces background, seemed at pains to show the macho, "snake-eater" image — the one the Army has always given the Special Forces.

However, in assessing the value of the Special Forces, one should look not so much at a group of individuals as at an idea exemplified by the best of them. If the United States does have to use might, the Special Forces mentality is more likely to understand the limitations of force and its ethical dimension than the regular armed forces' "can do" mentality. Pushing the Special Forces into a corner had no effect on people being killed in Vietnam, the Iranian desert, or Lebanon. On the other hand, Americans have heard a lot of "can do" talk.

Ed King, a colonel who was one of the few officers to resign from the Army over Vietnam, sees the dynamic in the Pentagon as the competition among the armed forces for money. "It is not that they are mercenary," he says, "but that the driving force for promotion is money. The way to power in the Pentagon is to control exotic weapons systems which command the most money."

Ideas, apparently, count for little. Have Americans forgotten something? Have Americans forgotten that this country was partly created by George Washington's irregulars, the first US Special Forces? Like the Viet Cong, they were nonuniformed and could melt into the populace. Like the US Army in Vietnam, the British blundered around with their heavy, largely drafted army, a long way from home. And they lost. •