

'Gung Ho' Oliver North: Reagan's Man of Action

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 8 — As a major in the Marine Corps in April 1980, Oliver L. North covertly led a detachment of Marines to the remote mountains of eastern Turkey near the border with Iran. Their task: to assist in freeing the American hostages held in Teheran.

A Government official who knows about the previously undisclosed mission says the Marines in the hideout were ready to fly into the Iranian capital if they were needed to cover the escape of the hostages who were to be rescued by the Army Delta Force.

As it turned out, the rescue mission was aborted after helicopters broke down and one collided with a transport plane on the ground in Iran, and Major North withdrew from Turkey as quietly as he had entered.

A little more than a year later, Major North reported to the White House for duty on the staff of the National Security Council. Since then he has earned a reputation for involvement in risky, secret operations, including the unfolding Iranian venture intended to gain the release of American hostages in Lebanon.

Over the last five years, the Marine Corps officer, now a lieutenant colonel, has become a key official whose role, Government officials say, has been to draw up plans, to have them approved by Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser, and to see that they are carried out.

Among his tasks, officials say, was to help equip the the National Security Council to take part directly in covert operations. He was also assigned to draw up Presidential directives intended to provide for continuity in the Government during a nuclear conflict.

The officials say Colonel North was also deeply involved in planning the invasion of Grenada in 1983, has been the White House's point man in supporting Nicaraguan rebel forces and helped plan the capture of Arab terrorists after the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro last year.

A Network of Vietnam Colleagues

In his work, the officials say, Colonel North has often relied on a network of military officers and civilian operatives he met in the Vietnam War. They include Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, a retired Army officer, and Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, a retired Air Force officer. Both are experienced in unconventional operations.

For Colonel North, 43 years old, it has been a heady experience, say officers and officials who know him, as he has far more authority than any military officer of his grade. The associates say he has also offended many senior officers, either because they are jealous or because they resent taking orders from a lieutenant colonel acting in the name of the President.

Colonel North's work has been so secret that the National Security Council has directed the Marine Corps not to release his service record, a document usually available for the asking. But a portrait of the marine and his career has been pieced together from military officers and civilian officials.

Colonel North graduated from the Naval Academy in 1968 and chose the Marine Corps. He fought in Vietnam, won the Silver Star, the third highest combat decoration, and was wounded. "Ollie still carries metal around," a friend said.

In Vietnam, he was assigned to counterinsurgency operations in which he met General Singlaub and General Secord, then lieutenant colonels. He later served as a planner in the Marine Corps headquarters in Washington.

Among several military officers sent to the National Security Council in mid-1981, Major North was the most junior. He was described as a bright, articulate officer with a "gung ho" spirit who saw the world in sharply etched blacks and whites.

Over time, those who know him say, Colonel North became "a true believer" in Mr. Reagan's policies. One associate described him as an action officer "who reads the President's mind." Another said, "Ollie is one who pushes ideology very hard into practicality."

Among Colonel North's first tasks, an official said, was to improve the White House apparatus for crisis management, including a revamping of the situation room that is to be used in a military alert.

At the end of 1981, Mr. Reagan eased out Richard V. Allen as his national security adviser and brought in William P. Clark, a longtime friend, from the State Department. Mr. Clark brought with him Robert C. McFarlane, who took Colonel North under his wing.

As the staff officer in charge of crisis management, Colonel North reviewed the Administration's plans for protracted nuclear war and the survival of the President and other top officials, and prepared directives for the President to sign.

He also took part in what an official called "the education of Ronald Reagan," who had come to the White House with little military experience. Colonel North organized a nuclear war game intended to expose the President to the realities of nuclear conflict.

Newly promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1983, Colonel North did most of the White House staff work for the invasion of Grenada in his cramped, austere office on an upper floor of the Old Executive Office Building.

Because the operation was to be mounted in four days, an official said, "Ollie didn't have time to be diplomatic — he had to be direct, and he bruised some generals and admirals."

About this time, Colonel North also became the key action officer for Central America. He planned and supervised the mining of Nicaraguan harbors by C.I.A. agents in late 1983. After it was discovered, many members of Congress were highly critical.

After Congress cut off aid to the Nicaraguan rebels in 1984, Colonel North activated a private network that included Generals Singlaub and Secord to raise funds and to arrange for deliveries of arms and supplies, officials say.

Officials who know about Colonel North's operations say that all have had the approval of Admiral Poindexter and, indirectly, President Reagan, and that at no time was he "free-lancing."