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Secrecy Surrounds Elite Army Unit Trained for Commando Operations

Officer Told Wife: 'I'll Be in the Desert'

New York Times News Service

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — From the moment of its birth 29 months ago behind the locked gates of a converted military prison at nearby Fort Bragg, secrecy has surrounded the government's elite Blue Light antiterrorist unit, a portion of which apparently participated in the rescue attempt in Iran Thursday.

That secrecy was in effect yesterday just as it was two years ago when Vice President Walter F. Mondale, Adm. Stansfield Turner, the director of Central Intelligence, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's national security adviser, made a predawn flight here to watch a 200-man unit demonstrate the storming of a plane seized by terrorists.

And Blue Light's veil of security was still drawn tight nine days ago when a Special Forces officer attached to the unit dropped from sight here after telling his wife simply, "I'll be in the desert."

Pentagon sources have said that about 90 members of Blue Light, also called the Delta Team, took part in the ill-fated mission that left eight Americans dead at a remote air strip in the Iranian desert. But officials here have declined to disclose details of Blue Light's training and deployment.

Because Fort Bragg is headquarters for the Army's Rapid-Deployment Airborne troops and the command center for the Army Special Forces troops that frequently work with the CIA in clandestine operations, this is a military town that is accustomed to confidential operations. However, what goes on behind the green-shaded fence at the Charlie's Angels compound has been an object of obsessive curiosity here.

The nickname, taken from a popular television show, is a tribute to Col. Charlie A. Beckwith, the combat-hardened commander of the Blue Light unit. Beckwith, a stiff-necked six-footer with a reputation for daring, was last seen here in public about five weeks ago at an officer's funeral. In the aftermath of the Iranian raid, he and his unit have become the Defense Department equivalents of nonpersons here.

"Where did you get that name?" said Rep. Charles Rose 3d of Fayetteville, a Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee who has worked closely with the antiterrorist unit, when asked about Beckwith. Army spokesmen at Fort



COL. CHARLES BECKWITH

Bragg concede only that there have been persistent "rumors" that an antiterrorist unit is based here, even though the State Department and the Army acknowledged the existence of Blue Light at Fort Bragg almost two years ago.

Most of what is known about Blue Light comes from the reporting of Fred Bost, a retired sergeant major who is the military writer for The Fayetteville Times. His accounts and congressional and military sources available to The New York Times provided the following history of the unit:

Blue Light was formed around November 1977 as a result of government concern that the United States lacked the capability to carry out missions like the rescue by German commandos of 86 hostages from an airliner seized by terrorists

in Somalia. Beckwith was given command of the unit because of his experience as commander of an earlier Project Delta, a Green Beret operation in Vietnam in 1965-66.

Although based here, the Blue Light unit was not under exclusive Army control. "It is a military unit responsible to the National Security Council and it works through the Department of Defense as a program of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Hodding Carter 3d, chief spokesman for the State Department, confirmed in 1978.

After February 1978, the unit, its size variously estimated at from 180 to 300 men, drew volunteers from all services, but depended heavily on Army Special Forces troops and training methods. Those methods, including 36-mile marches in full gear, were severe enough to draw criticism of Beckwith's methods, according to military sources. He reportedly told volunteers who had already passed very advanced training, "You've got to prove yourselves again."

"They picked people who were highly intelligent, in good physical condition, and who'd keep their mouths shut," a military source said.

The training for Blue Light troops ran the gamut of antiterrorist activities, with an emphasis on rescue rather than on fighting, according to the congressional source.

The deployment Monday of the Seventh Special Forces Group for training at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida may have provided a cover for or been associated with the Blue Light operation. The Fayetteville Times reported that at about the same time, five anesthetists and several doctors at the Womack Army Hospital here also apparently joined the Iranian mission. Their disappearance led to the officially unexplained shutdown of the hospital's surgery unit.

The Blue Light unit first came to public notice when the recently completed \$1.5 million stockade here began bustling with activity even though its prison population had dwindled to about 15. It was subsequently confirmed that an additional \$1 million had been spent in converting the stockade into a tightly secured antiterrorist training center.

Little is known about the exact details of that training, but in a town where the military is a major industry, faith in the secretive unit remained unshaken. "If Blue Light was involved, any argument that the mission failed because of a Mickey Mouse or Keystone Kops element is ludicrous," said an aide to a prominent local politician. "They're the super elite