

The *Contract Broken, and Restored*

Air Rescue in Operation Inherent Resolve, 2014–2017 (Part 1 of 2)

FORREST L. MARION

In every major conflict since Korea in the early 1950s, the prospect of a US Air Force helicopter crew prepared to put it all on the line to pick up a US or coalition Airman downed behind enemy lines, denied areas, or in potentially hostile waters has proven, again and again, an incalculable morale boost to friendly aircrews. That assurance has also provided the tangible benefit of returning combatants to their units to continue the fight.¹ Moreover, the rescue crews themselves shared in the morale factor. One Sikorsky H-5 helicopter pilot during 1950–1951 in Korea recalled, “After a successful rescue mission, morale would be sky high—from the rescue crew right down to the administrative clerk—they had all had a part in it.”² Although the doctrinal lesson seemed to be forgotten for several years around 1960, the Korean conflict established the concept of air rescue “as an integral part of U.S. fighting forces.”³

The mission of rescuing downed Airmen from the harsh terrain and freezing waters of Korea, the steamy jungles of Southeast Asia, and, more recently, from the sometimes even harsher terrain and climate of Afghanistan and Iraq has garnered wide recognition, numerous awards for valor, and heartfelt appreciation for the air rescue community and those special operations and sister service rotary-wing aircrews who have also performed combat rescues. Since 2014, however, in the ongoing US–coalition operation against the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) known as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the fact that friendly forces have lost no more than two manned aircraft over ISIS-controlled or denied territory—and none to date since providing a dedicated and realistic rescue capability for the Iraq–Syria theater of operations in 2015—has meant the value of the Combat Search and Rescue/Personnel Recovery (CSAR/PR) capability has been strictly *moral* (boosting aircrew morale) rather than *material* (returning downed Airmen) in nature. Although a 100-percent rate of returning downed Airmen home has been a rarity in military history, it is exactly in line with US–coalition wishes. Sometimes the goal has been achieved. In the 1999 NATO air campaign against the Milošević regime in Serbia, the United States lost two aircraft, an F-117 and an F-16. In both cases, US special operations rotary-wing forces rescued the pilot. There were no other coalition losses of manned aircraft over enemy territory.⁴

The Rise of ISIS and the Tepid US Response⁵

A recent, acclaimed study observes that the “uniquely abhorrent jihadist movement” ISIS arose by 2012 out of the turmoil of the Syrian Civil War and, not long after—taking advantage of the vacuum created by the Obama administration’s complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011—expanded the organization’s brutal reach to encompass sizable portions of Iraq and Syria. After capturing Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul, in June 2014, the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the so-called Islamic State a caliphate, with its capital at Raqqa, Syria. Within two months, flush with captured US weapons, Humvees, and M1 Abrams tanks, ISIS threatened the lives of tens of thousands of Kurds in northern Syria. Faced with an impending catastrophe and likely genocide against the Kurds, the Obama administration committed US air assets to protect, as the president stated, US personnel in the area and to provide humanitarian relief to thousands of civilians “trapped on a mountain without food and water.”⁶ Only months earlier, the president had famously referred to the now-rampaging ISIS as “a jayvee team” in comparison with its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁷ The air strikes that followed the president’s decision were the “first American use of kinetic airpower in Iraq” (relating to strikes by ordnance as opposed to nonkinetic airpower such as intelligence-gathering) in the almost three years since the US withdrawal.⁸

Statements such as “ISIL is not ‘Islamic’” revealed the administration’s reluctance to face the unpleasant realities on the ground.⁹ It took the Pentagon until 15 October—two months from the start of combat operations—to announce the designation “Operation Inherent Resolve” for what included a pinprick air campaign averaging less than 10 sorties a day. Noted military strategist Anthony Cordesman deemed the US-coalition air effort in the fall of 2014 as “little more than military tokenism” and “simply too small and unfocused.”¹⁰ Another defense analyst viewed the effort as applying “the least amount of force possible while still claiming credit for doing something about the Islamic State.”¹¹ John R. Bolton, who in 2018 became Pres. Donald Trump’s national security advisor, had written four years earlier that Obama’s policies “have been haphazard and confused, especially the halting, timid decision to intervene militarily.”¹² Although the US-coalition eventually increased its strike sortie rate and began targeting the source of the vast majority of ISIS’s revenues—oil and its financial infrastructure—in early 2016 John Andreas Olsen’s *Airpower Applied* characterized Inherent Resolve as oxymoronic due to its continued “manifest *absence* of any such resolve.”¹³ (emphasis added)

The Failure to Establish *Dedicated* CSAR/PR in OIR, 2014

The USAF, the Pentagon, and US Central Command (USCENTCOM) senior leadership exhibited an absence of resolve in two ways: 1), a *hard* fail, not adhering to joint personnel recovery doctrine during OIR's first month (August–September 2014); and, 2), a *soft* fail, not meeting the traditional, historically based expectations for *dedicated* CSAR/PR with a realistic chance of recovering USAF and other aviators for the next five months (September 2014–February 2015). The Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group arrived in the US Fifth Fleet area of operations on 12 September 2014. Shortly thereafter, a Marine MV-22 element was made available to the Commander Joint Task Force (CJTF)–OIR for PR duty; but between 8 August and early September there had been no PR force suitable for recovering a downed Airman.¹⁴

Consistent with the traditional expectations of Airmen, in 2001 Pres. George W. Bush—a former fighter pilot—directed that personnel recovery forces were to be in place *before* the start of combat operations in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Gen Richard Myers, USAF, acknowledged to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “Of course, we couldn't start anything until CSAR was in place, so let's talk about getting the CSAR in place.” They did so. But in 2014—amid an admittedly messy situation that required balancing insufficient dwell rates and assets and fluctuating administrative processes including those for requesting forces—the leadership failed to get PR (of any service capable of recovering a downed Airman) in place, much less the preferred PR mechanism of Air Force CSAR.¹⁵

That potentially consequential failure was the bottom line for some, perhaps many, Airmen, and it created angst among individuals up and down the chain of command who realized that the most-capable PR methodology was not being provided to Airmen operating over Iraq–Syria, with a despicable enemy on the ground below them.

PR Policy Background

A recent, authoritative study by three Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) experts began its policy discussion with reference to National Security Presidential Directive 12, *United States Citizens Taken Hostage Abroad*. The 2002 presidential directive stated, “The policy of the United States is to work diligently to free US citizens held hostage abroad, unharmed.” That was one of several foundations for PR, though the preferred scenario obviously was one that precluded personnel ever becoming a hostage. When the JPRA study was published in 2012, the most recent PR policy directive, DOD Directive (DODD) 3002.01E, *Personnel Recov-*

ery in the Department of Defense (2009) stated, “Preserving the lives and well-being of U.S. military, DoD civilians, and DoD contractor personnel authorized to accompany the U.S. Armed Forces who are in danger of becoming . . . [isolated] while participating in U.S.-sponsored activities or missions, is one of the highest priorities of the Department of Defense.” The JPRA authors pointed out that each service “has developed distinct tactics and techniques to perform PR, based upon doctrinal guidance in JP 3-50, *Personnel Recovery*, republished on 20 December 2011.” The above joint publication included an Air Force annex that stated, “CSAR is the operational capability that enables USAF rescue forces to respond effectively across the range of military operations. It is normally accomplished with a mix of *dedicated* and augmenting assets.” (emphasis added) Another passage stated simply, “CSAR is the primary USAF recovery method.”¹⁶

Air Force doctrine called for CSAR/PR to be in place prior to the start of hostilities. In Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 3-50, *Personnel Recovery Operations (PRO)*, published in 2005 and updated on 1 November 2011, the service’s position was that “the Air Force has always been committed to the recovery of *any* isolated personnel,” even though previous doctrine “*overly* focused on the rescue of aircrews.” One of its foundational doctrine statements was, “[CSAR] is how the Air Force accomplishes the PR recovery task.” (emphasis added) However, in 2014, the plan for dedicated PR for the recovery of isolated personnel during the first six months of OIR was decidedly suboptimal, and the joint task force lacked a dedicated Air Force CSAR capability for the benefit of any downed aircrew during the same period. If only senior leaders could have been accused of being “overly focused” on the rescue of aircrews, as AFDD 3-50 confessed had been the case in earlier conflicts.¹⁷

The doctrine contained in *PRO* envisioned a different scenario, and it harkened back to General Myers and Operation Enduring Freedom:

PRO forces should deploy in theater *prior to the start of hostilities* and be prepared to provide *immediate PRO mission capability* with minimal support airlift. . . . The initial deployment of PR forces in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) represents a perfect example of the significant emphasis that combatant commanders and Service chiefs put on PR. Military commanders delayed decisive operations until the [joint force commander] established an adequate PR capability. Another way to look at this, *OEF demonstrated the need to have PR forces in place prior to commencement of combat operations*.¹⁸ (emphasis added)

Historically, Airmen understood that “an adequate PR capability” for those conducting flight operations over hostile territory meant CSAR.

As the president had directed and CJCS Myers indicated, “getting the CSAR in place” was the full expectation of USAF, if not also Naval, aviators. That was

despite the fact that the terms *dedicated* and *CSAR* did not appear in the (above) excerpt from *PRO*. These terms appeared at least half a dozen times in the short *PRO* document. In its most detailed passage, the *PRO* doctrine writers stated, “*Dedicated* forces include rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft, specially trained ‘battle-field Airmen,’ and specific duty positions crucial in the [personnel recovery operations] execution.” The doctrine document referred to “*dedicated* ground or airborne alert posture,” “*dedicated* *PRO* forces,” and “*dedicated* Air Force assets that organize, train, and perform personnel recovery operations.”¹⁹ (emphases added)

The key term was *dedicated*, an adjective meaning “given over to a particular purpose.” In an Air Force doctrine context, for decades that purpose was understood to mean the combat rescue of Airmen (or special operators) downed in enemy-held or denied territory. A standard judicial doctrine of statutory interpretation presumes that legislators include certain words because they have significance. If a similar approach may be permitted in the case of a doctrinal document, the repeated inclusion of the term *dedicated* must be understood as having significance. That significance was to convey that rescue assets (aircraft, personnel, organizations, and equipment) were “given over” to the sole purpose of combat rescue/personnel recovery. Otherwise, the word would not have been used or was used without meaning.²⁰

Since *CSAR* was the Air Force’s mechanism, methodology, or “how the Air Force accomplishes the PR recovery task,” were Airmen at fault for anticipating that the joint force commander would provide *CSAR* when they operated over hostile territory? Moreover, when it came to bringing back a downed Airman from enemy territory, it was inarguable that no other PR methodology topped *CSAR*. That was to be expected, as no other service had assets tasked solely with PR. Was not a dedicated *CSAR* team the implied *contract* the country had led its Airmen to expect since the Korea-to-Southeast Asia era, validated (albeit with some failures along the way) in every conflict in the half-century since? If perhaps that was asking too much, joint and service doctrine called for *some* service’s methodology of PR before the commencement of combat operations. Gen James Jones, USMC, the former commander of European Command, expressed it this way, albeit more broadly: “The military must have a ‘social contract’ with the troops and must never see them as expendable.” However, in OIR such support was nowhere to be found for the first month. And for the following five months, did a PR force based approximately 600 miles away and close to three-hours’ flight time from the target area meet the intent?²¹

From Zero to TRAP, But No Air Force CSAR in 2014

In terms of CSAR/PR, the OEF experience became a lesson unlearned during the early part of OIR. Perhaps even more important during OIR's first six months, however, the limited CSAR/PR capability stressed planners, fliers, and tactical commanders alike. One PR planner, who in 2014 worked at the JPRA and later at the US Air Forces Central Command (USAFCENT) headquarters at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, Dr. Erick W. Nason, put the matter bluntly: "One of the biggest concerns that came up was Personnel Recovery: *there was none*. . . . When this crisis began, there was *no capability within the theater* to support anything [in terms of PR] in Iraq," despite the fact that USCENTCOM required a four-hour response as the command's planning base line.²² (emphasis added)

Even a four-hour response was "not serious" in the view of noted airpower and air rescue historian Darrel Whitcomb, and it reflected "an expectation of a low probability of an isolating event." Whitcomb pointed out that "such an elongated response time did not fit historical norms for our recovery forces established in Southeast Asia, Desert Storm, or [Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom], where as a general principle, increased response time to an isolating event was related to a lower probability of recovery." For perhaps the first time since the summer of 1950 when USAF aircrews were expected to "walk out" if downed over North Korea, amazingly in 2014 the initial PR plan was "self-recovery," recalled Nason, a former US Army Ranger who finished his military career as a PR planner, retiring in 2005. Initially for OIR, isolated personnel were to try to make their own way to the US embassy in Baghdad. Worse still, isolated personnel could not expect the assistance of friendly local nationals, according to Nason, because the Iraqi evasion network "didn't exist" after 2011. When OIR began, perhaps adding to their chagrin, US aircrews received none of the gold coins their predecessors in Korea had enjoyed in case they had to buy their way home. For a time, they were truly on their own. In 2014, in a de facto sense the *contract* was broken, a disgrace that remained largely hidden only by the fact that no US Airman was burned alive before viewers worldwide.²³

The embassy in Baghdad might have helped more than a safe house, but USAFCENT PR planners were told the three MH-60 helicopters attached to the embassy were unavailable for personnel recovery. While the embassy maintained a PR cell, local force protection issues overwhelmed the responsible individual, leaving no time for PR planning. Nason recalled that with the initial deployment of special operations teams to Baghdad, "our biggest concern [was] that we were on our own." Given the Obama administration's concern for limiting the number of boots on the ground, it took until September or October to get a Special Op-

erations Command Central (SOCCENT) PR planner/coordinator into Iraq to support the SOCCENT teams that, by then, had been on the ground for weeks, if not a month or longer.²⁴

Col Dustin P. Smith, at different times in 2014 the USAFCENT chief of staff and operations director, remarked four years later that OIR had “hit at an inconvenient time for the Air Force,” which was battling manpower cuts and sequestration. Airframes were in short supply as well, and he recalled USAFCENT was “constantly doing this shuffle . . . of resources around the [area of responsibility],” in part because for years Air Force HH-60Gs had been performing so many casualty evacuation missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, the rules for requesting forces in the operational theater were changing, adding to the challenge of meeting a legitimate requirement such as dedicated CSAR/PR. Smith’s bottom line was that it was “a capacity issue . . . the Air Force just didn’t have it,” he said. In one individual-level case that illustrated the USAF’s internal turmoil, a recently promoted colonel who had completed a doctorate paid for by the Air Force less than two years earlier was forced to retire in 2014, the shortsighted decision of a selective early retirement board. Another factor may have been the Obama administration’s Asia-Pacific “pivot,” which, in the view of the USAFCENT chief of PR in 2014, Maj Aaron B. Griffith, added to USCENTCOM’s reluctance to send PR forces back into Iraq.²⁵

In September, a US Marine Corps element consisting of MV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft—detached temporarily from its amphibious ready group—was “chopped” to the joint task force and appeared regularly on the air tasking order for OIR PR duty. The MV-22s were more or less dedicated PR assets for the next five months. While the Marines’ MV-22 capability was welcomed, the USMC tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel (TRAP) team was far from optimal for OIR’s conditions. First, the aircraft were based in Kuwait, about 600 miles from the area of operations. Response times depended on several factors, including the location of any isolated personnel, TRAP team alert status, threat, and weather conditions, but under the best of circumstances PR planners expected about a 2.5-hour flight time from launch (which might take up to an hour from notification) to being overhead of a survivor in northern Iraq–Syria. The historical record of successful rescues in prior conflicts made that length of time problematic, and any downed Airman was placed at high risk to capture and exploitation. In 2015, former special operator and combat veteran Nolan Peterson, writing for *The Daily Signal*, reported the TRAP team’s transit time from its then-undisclosed location “is too long to give downed pilots a realistic chance to evade the enemy.”²⁶



(US Marine Corps photo by LCpl Skyler E. Treverrow)

Figure 1. Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel rehearsal. US Marines with 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force–Crisis Response–Central Command (SPMAGTF–CR–CC), conduct a security patrol during a Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel rehearsal drill in the US Central Command area of operations, 25 October 2014. The Marines and Sailors of SPMAGTF–CR–CC serve as an expeditionary, crisis-response force tasked with supporting operations, contingencies, and security cooperation in Marine Corps Forces Central Command and USCENTCOM.

Second, the TRAP teams were not particularly well trained for CSAR/PR, at least initially. Because TRAP was an additional capability and not a primary mission, the teams could hardly have been expected to be as capable as those Air Force units for which rescue was their bread and butter. Col Gregory A. Roberts, the 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group’s (1ERQG) commander when it activated in 2015, recalled that his pararescuemen (the enlisted were known as PJs, for parajumpers) and PJ support personnel worked with both the Marines’ TRAP in Kuwait and, later, the Navy’s MH-60S element at Erbil, Iraq, starting with the basics of “communication for picking up a guy with a PRC90 or PRC112 [survival] radio. . . . And we worked with them on *very basic* [tactics, techniques, and procedures] to ingress and egress *an uncontested zone*. We never got to contested zones, at least in 2016.” (emphasis added) In one training exercise held at the Udari Range in Kuwait in March 2016, the Marine MV-22 element participated with USAF HC-130 and pararescue members. In 2019, former PR chief, now–Lt Col Aaron Griffith, felt the TRAP team’s training had brought them “signifi-

cantly closer in capability to that of CSAR forces.” Still, the bottom line expressed by one A-10C Sandy-1 (CSAR flight lead) pilot, Maj Michael R. Dumas, was simply, “TRAP is not CSAR, it’s TRAP.” His point was beyond dispute: the term itself—Tactical Recovery of *Aircraft* and Personnel—demonstrated a divided purpose, clearly at odds with the sole purpose of Air Force CSAR/PR, which was the rescue or recovery of the downed *personnel*.²⁷ (emphasis added)

Perhaps the Operation Odyssey Dawn, March 2011, recovery in eastern Libya of a downed F-15E Strike Eagle pilot, call sign Bolar-34, by an MV-22 may have encouraged OIR’s personnel recovery planners three years later. The rescue was successful and was executed quickly and in a chaotic environment. The recovery itself was uncontested, but, unfortunately, was marred by a US helicopter’s strafing of (friendly) Libyan rebel forces who were attempting to assist the pilot (rebel forces had recovered the Strike Eagle’s weapon systems officer, or WSO). After the WSO had been rescued, the villagers “had a celebration for him,” stated one of them. However, at the time the TRAP team was unaware of all that and so rightly protected the downed Airman from the unknown elements approaching his position.²⁸

But, third, in Roberts’ view the MV-22 did not hover well, especially in the desert, and it was very difficult to land well in the fine powdery sand. Moreover, “the crews don’t typically train to the brown-out landings [as] the AF rescue helos do, or the [Air Force] AFSOC CV-22 crews,” wrote Colonel Roberts two years after finishing his second command tour in a USCENTCOM combat theater.²⁹

It was only after 1st Lt Moaz Youssef al-Kasasbeh of the Jordanian Air Force (call sign Blade-11) was downed in late December, and then gruesomely burned to death by ISIS a week or two later, that US leadership awakened to the CSAR/PR situation and quickly moved to deploy dedicated helicopters to Iraq. And if anyone in US leadership still required convincing, coalition members demanded the Americans increase their personnel recovery posture if they expected partner air forces to fly combat sorties over ISIS-held territory.³⁰

Blade-11 had landed in the water and was quickly rolled-up by ISIS forces in the vicinity. In Colonel Roberts’s view, there had been virtually no chance of rescuing him without an immediately ready CSAR aircraft operating within perhaps 20 miles of the downed pilot’s location. One former official at USAFCENT headquarters stated, “When that Jordanian pilot was [downed] we really did not have a way to rapidly go get that guy [even] if we had the opportunity.” From his perspective as a former PR chief, Lieutenant Colonel Griffith added that, unfortunately, Blade-11 had been “completely incapable and untrained to effect his own evasion and recovery,” which highlighted the lack of some coalition partners’ training in personnel recovery.³¹

Others expressed similar concerns. Lt Col James E. Brunner, an HC-130 instructor pilot who deployed to Ali Al Salem AB, Kuwait, commanded, first, the 26th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron within the 1ERQG in 2015, and, later, the 79th Rescue Squadron. He recalled that the lack of CSAR/PR at the outset of OIR made him “very uncomfortable.” He went on to express his perspective, one traditionally shared by the rescue community, “We are the first in, we get there before anything even starts to happen, and we’re the last out, when the last bomb has been dropped. . . . That was always my expectation.”³²

By September 2014, the PR reality—an MV-22 perhaps three hours away—was not what Airmen had come to expect, even if personnel recovery doctrine was arguably met. In an interview four years later, Colonel Roberts described the recovery capability during the early months of OIR in late 2014 as “a patchwork of non-dedicated [CSAR/PR] assets that the Joint Personnel Recovery Center [JPRC at] Al Udeid could have put together on behalf of the CENTCOM commander to effect a combat search and rescue recovery.” Any mission in the first six months of OIR to retrieve isolated personnel would have been ad hoc. Moreover, the MV-22s were not “optimized” for personnel recovery in the operational area, he added, perhaps referring mainly to the lengthy flight time required to reach an isolated member in northern Iraq–Syria. In 2015, an Erbil-based pararescueman was not wide of the mark when he stated, “If a pilot goes down, we’re their only chance,” surely an implicit acknowledgment that an MV-22 based in Kuwait several months earlier had been considered unlikely to arrive in time to make a difference. An Erbil-based Pave Hawk pilot who also deployed in 2015 described what his team’s rotary-wing assets had brought to the table. Several years later, Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau, recalled, “We were the only dedicated CSAR platform with the reaction time, defensive systems, and the ‘legs’ to effectively cover the most-targeted areas.” Roberts was among several USAFCENT field-grade leaders who considered Blade-11’s downing and horrific death “a watershed moment,” wake-up call, or catalyst for USAFCENT’s forming the 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group.³³

The Cultural Chasm of the Opposing Sides

One, perhaps telling, aspect to the establishment of a rescue organization to support OIR concerned the cultural or moral differences of the opposing sides. On one hand, for many decades US Air Force air rescue forces—*specifically* designated for that mission—have been viewed as the guys in “white hats,” willing to go to great personal risk to pluck a downed Airman from the enemy’s grasp. In his *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1975*, noted airpower historian Earl H. Tilford, Jr. addressed three basic reasons for the American devotion of significant military resources for the purpose of rescuing downed Airmen: (1) the traditional,

which was to say, Judeo-Christian, “belief in the sanctity of human life”; (2) the high cost of training military pilots who might need to be replaced if not for a rescue capability; and, (3) the knowledge that fliers “performed their duties more efficiently knowing that every effort would be made to rescue them if they were shot down.” The last of these, the morale factor, has been highlighted many times from Korea to the post-9/11 global war.³⁴

On the other hand, ISIS appeared as the very embodiment of evil. In some cases, its fighters not only butchered but reveled in their butchery—not only of enemy fighters but even civilian captives, including women and children. Unfortunately, there was precedent during the 1820s for ISIS’s behavior in a region not far from the Levant. At a meeting held in New York City for the relief of the Greeks, Luther Bradish, Esq., who between 1819 and 1825 served as an envoy of Pres. John Quincy Adams—and in 1827 as the literary agent for novelist James Fenimore Cooper—reported his observations of the suffering Greeks in their quest for independence from the Turks:

I tell you that which I have myself seen. . . . I have seen the smoking ruins of her towns, and her villages—the devastation of her fields and her flocks. I have seen her peaceful inhabitants, men and women, murdered in cold blood. I have seen her daughters carried into slavery. I have seen them sold in the markets of Asia to furnish out the harems of her brutal oppressors. Nay, more, sir, I have seen the bleeding heads of her heroes, her patriots, and her venerable sages, exposed upon the gates of the seraglio, to the scoffs and insults of a ferocious fanatic, and infuriated mob. Each returning evening has brought new victims, and each succeeding morning renewed this horrid spectacle.³⁵

Bradish recounted that while traveling through Turkey on horseback he often encountered government couriers headed to Constantinople, their horses loaded with sacks. When he asked what the sacks contained, the cold reply was, “O nothing but Greek heads and ears.” “This was not a circumstance that occurred rarely,” said Bradish, but it was almost a daily occurrence or even several times a day. Given ISIS’s disturbingly similar treatment of its victims two centuries later—those it killed, as well as the women and girls it enslaved—was not the impartial observer hard pressed to imagine a wider gulf between OIR’s belligerents in terms of culture and morality on the battlefield? Simply put, one side, particularly its rescue force, embraced a culture of life; the other, ISIS, a culture of death. Although Pres. George W. Bush a decade earlier had described al-Qaeda in an address, not ISIS, he came close to acknowledging the same cultural chasm when he summed up the enemy’s creed as “a mindset that rejoices in suicide, incites murder, and celebrates every death we mourn.” In contrast, Bush continued,

“We do love life, the life given to us and to all. We believe in the values that uphold the dignity of life.”³⁶

Dr. Forrest L. Marion

Dr. Marion (VMI; MA, University of Alabama; PhD, University of Tennessee) has been a staff historian and oral historian since 1998 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He retired as a colonel from the US Air Force Reserve in 2010 with 16 years of active duty. His most recent publication is *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005–2015* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

Notes

1. In Korea, fixed-wing SA-16 amphibians also conducted combat rescues from inland and coastal waters, and from several offshore islands, north of the front lines; see Forrest L. Marion, “The Dumbo’s Will Get Us in No Time,: Air Force SA-16 Combat Operations in the Korean War Theater, 1950–1953,” *Air Power History* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 16–29. That fixed-wing combat rescue role was seen in a few cases during the Southeast Asia conflict a decade later and more recently with the MV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft.

2. Richard McVay, 3rd Air Rescue Squadron Operations Officer, conversations with the author, June 1992.

3. Forrest L. Marion, *That Others May Live: USAF Air Rescue in Korea* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2004), 7, 47–48; Ed Timperlake, “The TRAP Mission over Libya: Highlighting a Strategic Opportunity,” *SLDinfo.com*, 17 August 2011. Although the relevant Air Force doctrine documents neglected any mention of the Korean experience in terms of CSAR/PR, it was in Korea where US–coalition Airmen first came to expect that air rescue forces would go to great risks to recover them; *Combat Search and Rescue, Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1.6* (15 July 2000), i, 2; *Personnel Recovery Operations, Air Force Doctrine Document 3-50* (1 June 2005) (incorporating interim change 2, 1 November 2011), 2–3; and *Annex 3-50 Personnel Recovery, Introduction to Personnel Recovery*, Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, Maxwell AFB, AL, 23 October 2017.

4. Darrel D. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012), 448–58; and Darrel D. Whitcomb and Forrest L. Marion, “Team Sport, Combat Search and Rescue Over Serbia, 1999,” *Air Power History* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 28–37.

5. While several designations have been used for the radical Sunni terrorist group, this essay will use the currently favored term in US military circles, *ISIS*. One alternate designation, *ISIL* (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), by definition includes the territory of the State of Israel (part of the Levant or land areas touching the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea), making the term itself a misnomer because Israel, thankfully, retains its independence. See Christopher Woolf and Nina Porzucki, “Why Are We Having Such a Hard Time Coming Up with a Name for ISIS? (ISIL? Daesh?)” *PRI*, 8 January 2014 (updated 17 November 2015), <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-01-08/you-say-levant-i-say-sham-lets-call-whole-thing-greater-syria>.

6. Barack Obama, “President Obama Makes a Statement on Iraq,” *YouTube*, 7 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=ax4a6cH1Wjs.

7. Quoted in David Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama," *New Yorker*, 19 January 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

8. John Andreas Olsen, ed., *Airpower Applied: U.S., NATO, and Israeli Combat Experience* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 180–84; and Anthony N. Celso, "Zarqawi's Legacy: Al Qaeda's ISIS 'Renegade,'" *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 2015), 27.

9. Quoted in Aaron Blake, "Obama Says the Islamic State 'Is Not Islamic,' Americans Disagree," *Washington Post*, 11 September 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/11/obama-says-the-islamic-state-is-not-islamic-americans-are-inclined-to-disagree/>.

10. Quoted in David Welna, "Critics Say 'Inherent Resolve' Mission Against ISIS Is Underwhelming," *NPR*, 15 October 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/15/356451133/critics-say-inherent-resolve-mission-against-isis-is-underwhelming>.

11. Mark Gunzinger and John Stillion, "The Unserious Air War Against ISIS," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mark-gunzinger-and-john-stillion-the-unserious-air-war-against-isis-1413327871>.

12. John R. Bolton, "Destroy the 'Islamic State,'" *National Review*, 8 September 2014, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2014/09/08/destroy-islamic-state/>.

13. Barack Obama, "On ISIL, Our Objective Is Clear," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 10 September 2014; Jennifer Hlad, "Marine Corporal Is Reclassified as 1st to Die in Operation Inherent Resolve," *Stars and Stripes*, 28 October 2014; Olsen, ed., *Airpower Applied*, 185–88 ["manifest absence" quote, emphasis in original]; Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Imploding U.S. Strategy in the Islamic State War?," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 23 October 2014; and Bolton, "Destroy the 'Islamic State.'" As late as June 2015, 10 months from the start of OIR, USAFCENT aircraft released less than 1,700 weapons during the month, barely 50 per day over Iraq–Syria; see Slide, "Combined Forces Air Component Commander, 2011–2016 Airpower Statistics," United States Air Forces Central Command, Combined Air and Space Operations Center, *USAFCENT (CAOC) Public Affairs*, 31 December 2016 (copy at AFHRA).

14. "DOD: Marine's Death 1st in Iraq, 2nd since Start of US Campaign against Islamic State," *Stars and Stripes*, 25 October 2014; and Christopher Lindahl, "Amphibious Squadron Five/11th MEU Transits from U.S. 5th Fleet to U.S. 7th Fleet," *Amphibious Squadron Five Public Affairs*, 11 January 2015. The authority/responsibility for PR operations resided with the commander, USCENTCOM; see Briefing, "USCENTCOM Personnel Recovery," Maj Aaron B. Griffith, USAFCENT/A3XR, 20 March 2014, version 2.0, slide 3 (CD entitled "CSAR files," by USAFCENT/HO, 9 October 2018, copy at AFHRA). A document search at the Office of the Secretary of Defense Executive Archive for unclassified documentation (during 2014) concerning dedicated CSAR/PR assets for OIR produced negative results. If perhaps the USCENTCOM commander had requested additional CSAR/PR assets from the CJCS or the Secretary of Defense, such a request was not discovered or was not releasable.

15. *Personnel Recovery Operations*, 17; and Lee Pera, Paul D. Miller, and Darrel Whitcomb, "Personnel Recovery: Strategic Importance and Impact," *Air & Space Power Journal* 26, no. 6 (November–December 2012), 102.

16. Pera, Miller, and Whitcomb, "Personnel Recovery," 86–87 (quotes 1–3 quoted by Pera, Miller, and Whitcomb); Joint Publication 3–50, *Personnel Recovery*, 20 Dec. 2011, F-1, F-3 (emphasis added); and William J. Rowell, "Whole of Government Approach to Personnel Recovery," Strategy Research Project, United States Army War College, Class of 2012, 6, 8, 17. Since its

formation in 1999, the JPRA has been the DOD's office of primary responsibility for PR (Pera, Miller, and Whitcomb, 101).

17. *Personnel Recovery Operations*, iii, viii.

18. *Ibid.*, 21.

19. *Ibid.*, viii, 8, 11, 13, 17.

20. Forrest L. Marion and Jon T. Hoffman, *Forging a Total Force: The Evolution of the Guard and Reserve* (Washington: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), 130.

21. *Personnel Recovery Operations*, iii, viii, 3, 10, 11, 17; and Jones quoted by Pera, Miller, and Whitcomb, "Personnel Recovery," 86. The air distance from Kuwait to Syria was at least 600 nautical miles; Kuwait to Mosul, Iraq, was 550 nm.

22. Oral History Interview (OHI), Dr. Erick W. Nason, USAFCENT PR Plans, by author, Shaw AFB, SC, 5 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2790); and Central Command Regulation [CCR] 525-33, *Personnel Recovery Procedures*, 17 November 2015, 9. Documentation from 2014 also stated the four-hour response time.

23. Darrel D. Whitcomb, to author, e-mail, "Re: 2014 PR req't," 25 January 2019; Darrel D. Whitcomb, to author, e-mail, "Fwd: rewrite of para. Comments," 29 January 2019; Forrest L. Marion, "Sabre Pilot Pickup: Unconventional Contributions to Air Superiority in Korea," *Air Power History* 49, no. 1 (2002), 23–24; Nason interview; and Dr. Erick W. Nason, to author, e-mail, "RE: interview follow-up," 4 October 2018.

24. Nason interview; and Nason e-mail.

25. OHI, Col Dustin P. Smith (USAF, Ret.), by author, Shaw AFB, SC, 6 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2792); Debbie Gildea, "AF to Convene Enhanced Selective Early Retirement Board in June," *Air Force Personnel Center Public Affairs*, 3 January 2014; Col Edwin H. Redman (USAF, Ret.), with author, conversation, Prattville, AL, 19 October 2018; and Lt Col Aaron B. Griffith (USAF), with author, telephone conversation, 22 October 2018.

26. Nason interview; Col Gregory A. Roberts (USAF), to author, e-mail, "RE: draft para's," 9 October 2018; Lt Col Aaron B. Griffith (USAF), to author, e-mail, "RE: MV-22s in Sep. 2014," 17 January and 22 January 2019; and Nolan Peterson, "What 'Boots on the Ground' in Iraq Looks Like," *Daily Signal*, 22 September 2015, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2015/09/22/what-boots-on-the-ground-in-iraq-looks-like/>.

27. Roberts e-mails, [emphasis added]; Griffith e-mails; and OHI, Maj Michael R. Dumas (USAF), by author, Maxwell AFB, AL, 8 August 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2778).

28. Anna Mulrine, "How an MV-22 Osprey Rescued a Downed US Pilot in Libya," *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 March 2011; Ewen MacAskill, Tom Kington, and Chris McGreal, "Libya: Six Injured as US Team Botches Rescue of Downed Airmen," *Guardian*, 22 March 2011; Josh Phillips, "The Rescue of Bolar 34," *Naval Aviation News*, 15 December 2011; Pera, Miller, and Whitcomb, "Personnel Recovery," 83, 104; and Otto Kreisher, "Strike Eagle Rescue," *Air Force Magazine*, March 2013, 48–49.

29. Roberts e-mail. The author enjoyed the privilege of working with then–Lieutenant Colonel Roberts during his 2010–2011 command of the 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron in Kabul, Afghanistan.

30. Nason interview.

31. OHI, DATA MASKED (USAF), September 2018; Roberts e-mail; and Griffith e-mail.

32. OHI, Lt Col James E. Brunner (USAF), by author, Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ, 11 September 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2793); Col Gregory A. Roberts (USAF), to author, e-mail, “RE: status of CSAR paper,” 24 January 2019.

33. OHI, Col Gregory A. Roberts (USAF), by author, Randolph AFB, TX, 24 August 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2783); OHI, Col Dustin P. Smith (USAF, Ret.), 6 September 2018; Fred Shepherd, “Up in the Air,” *Armada International*, April 2015, 8–13; Peterson, “What ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Iraq Looks Like”; and Maj Thaddeus L. Ronnau (USAF), with author, telephone conversation, 8 January 2019. On 6 December 2014, US Navy SEALs and Yemeni forces attempted to rescue a hostage held by al-Qaeda in southern Yemen. Note: This may be the other of the two known attempted hostage/PR missions in the August 2014–August 2015 time period (in addition to the Jordanian pilot); see Andy Oppenheimer, “Back to Iraq: Military Operations in the Middle East,” *Military Technology* 39, no. 2 (February 2015), 63; Racheal E. Watson, “There Is Always a First: The 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group Activation,” 386th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs, 3 September 2015; and “CSAR Unit Activates for Iraq and Syria,” *airforcemag.com* archive, 8 September 2015. Fred Shepherd’s article (above) mentioned US Navy MH-60R/S Seahawk helicopters in support of OIR, presumably in late 2014 or early 2015. No OIR participant I have interviewed has shed light on this matter. Almost certainly, the helicopters remained under the tactical and operational control of the deployed carrier task force to which they belonged; probably they were loosely considered to be available assets for CSAR/PR missions given the necessary coordination with the Navy. Basically, this was another element of CSAR/PR ad hocery of which OIR witnessed more than its share.

34. Ioannis Koskinas, *Black Hats and White Hats: The Effect of Organizational Culture and Institutional Identity on the Twenty-third Air Force* (CADRE Paper No. 24) (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, December 2006); and Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1975* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 2–3.

35. “Turkish Barbarity,” *Charleston Observer* (South Carolina), 3 March 1827. Richard E. Bennett referred to Bradish as “a lawyer, linguist, diplomat, and statesman”; Bradish served as a New York State assemblyman from 1827 to 1830. He was known as “a man of integrity”: see Bennett, “A Very Particular Friend’—Luther Bradish,” included in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 63–82, <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/approaching-antiquity-joseph-smith-and-ancient-world/very-particular-friend-luther-bradish>.

36. “Turkish Barbarity”; *Personnel Recovery Operations*, 1; Holly Young, “Kidnapped by Isis at 15: ‘I Never Thought I’d See the Day When I Was Free,’” *Guardian*, 17 March 2016; and “Slaves of ISIS: The Long Walk of the Yazidi Women,” *Guardian*, 25 July 2017. Arguably, for a time the US–coalition operated under rules of engagement so restrictive as to negate much of the cost, however defined, of employing deadly force against ISIS.

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