

## **June 14, 1980**

# **Information about the USA's Failed Military Operation in Iran**

### **Citation:**

"Information about the USA's Failed Military Operation in Iran", June 14, 1980, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, MfS, ZAIG, Nr. 11586. Obtained by Roham Alvandi.  
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/134853>

### **Summary:**

Detailed report on the failures and proposed outline of an aborted American mission to free hostages held in the American Embassy in Tehran.

### **Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Blavatnik Family Foundation

### **Original Language:**

German

### **Contents:**

Translation - English

Berlin, 14.6.1980

#### Information

about the USA's failed military operation in Iran

On the morning of the 25th of April, 1980, an attempt by assault forces from the USA to free the individuals who have been trapped in the Tehran Embassy of the United States since the 4th of November, 1979, ended in a fiasco.

The military operation with the code name "Blue Light" failed, according to official American statements, because of "technical deficiencies."

The operation had to be called off at an early stage, at which 8 people were killed and several wounded, and a transport plane and seven large helicopters were reported lost.

The military operation took place under the immediate leadership of the Department of Defense and the direct order of President Carter, who officially took full responsibility (see attachment).

Portrayals of the likely course of the military operation are based on incomplete and partially contradictory information from Western press organs.

#### The Course of the Military Operation

From a staging area in Egypt six Hercules C-130 American transport planes took off on 24.4.1980 at 19:00 in the direction of Iran. On board were 90 occupation force members (?) and technical specialists, as well as 90 men from the "Delta Team" (which is also referred to as the "Blue Light Team").

The head of the Delta Team and the immediate leader of the undertaking is Colonel Charles A. Beckwith, who had previously ordered similar actions in the Vietnam War. Major General James B. Vaughth directed the undertaking by radio from a C-130 transport plane stationed in either Egypt or Oman. He was stationed in Korea and Vietnam and has been responsible for the planning of missions like this since 1979. The connection between the command center in Washington and the commando troop was maintained by satellite.

The Delta Team is a special unit of US fighting forces that was put together in 1977. It is stationed at Fort Bragg (North Carolina) and consists of volunteers from all armed services and is equipped with the most modern weaponry and fighting equipment.

The special unit takes orders only from the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones. It is placed under the National Security Council of the USA, i.e. the President's National Security Advisor Brzezinski.

Three hours after takeoff in Egypt the six Hercules planes landed at an air base on the west coast of the Persian Gulf, of which three are thought to have originated at the Ramstein US air base in the FRG. They were fueled and took on board weapons and electronic equipment to disrupt Iranian communications, presumably from units in the US naval fleet then crossing the Persian Gulf.

At about 23:00 the Hercules planes took off again. The route to the destination, Tabas, in the Kefir salt desert of the Eastern Iranian province Khorasan, is about 1000 km by air. For the four-motor turboprop planes (600 km/h) the trip could be made in

exactly 2 hours. But they took between 2 1/2 and 3 hours, because they needed to pass undetected through the radar network of the Iranian air defense. This network was installed by US companies during the time of the Shah's regime for the defense of the Iranian coast. The system is doubly secure, in that every point along the coast is watched by two radar stations, so that no gap can exist if one station fails.

The USA learned every corner of the country in the course of 20 years spent arming and training the Shah's army, and the Hercules planes found a hole in the radar network, which may have been made with electronic equipment. But this gap was so narrow that the planes in the Hercules fleet could only fly through one by one - one behind the other, not side-by-side. This occurred at about 1 am local time. At about the same time eight RH-53d helicopters took off from the American aircraft carrier "Nimitz," which operates in the Gulf of Oman off the Iranian coast. For them it is no problem to fly close to the ground to sneak past any radar blockade unseen. It took the helicopters three hours to fly the distance to their planned destination.

There, on the edge of the Kefir Desert, 165 kilometers southwest from the city Tabas, a camp was supposed to be established for 24 hours.

The temporary airstrip had already been used once two years before, when Tabas was destroyed by an earthquake. For this reason, the Americans knew about it.

At that time, Hercules transport planes and helicopters also landed there, including American ones, with aid supplies. The helicopters were to be fueled on the improvised runway for the approximately 320 kilometer flight to Tehran.

Two weeks before the failed undertaking a C-130 transport plane also landed at the old desert air strip in order to conduct ground tests. This was to establish that C-130 planes loaded with fuel could reliably land there. At this time runway markings were also installed. Of the eight helicopters that took off from the aircraft carrier "Nimitz," however, only six reached the desert airstrip near Tabas. 90 minutes into the flight the first helicopter began to malfunction because of engine damage. It had to make an emergency landing in the desert and was left there after the crew was transferred to another helicopter.

Shortly thereafter another helicopter was lost: its gyrocompass was not working, and the pilot got lost for two hours in a sandstorm before giving up and flying back to the aircraft carrier. This helicopter carried at least a dozen specialists who were needed in order to successfully break into the Embassy. For the success of Operation Blue Light at least six helicopters were needed, and this minimum was attained.

A significant event took place in the meantime at the desert air strip. The planning had been based on long observation. There were photos taken by satellite and airplane of this area. But they were taken by day. The surveillance photos never showed any traffic on the road that led through the middle of the landing zone. But on the night that the operation took place, a bus with 44 passengers, a tanker truck, and a small passenger van appeared. The owner of the bus was taken captive by the Americans. As the other two vehicles approached seconds later, they were shot at with machine guns. The tanker truck caught fire and exploded. But the driver of the truck was able to climb into the passenger van and despite further shots thereby managed to get away. It was presumed that both fleeing drivers were smugglers and would not notify the police.

Clearly it did not occur to those conducting air surveillance that Iranians drive in the desert at night, since at day it would be too hot to do so.

When the helicopters had been fueled at the desert air strip, it was determined during

inspection of one helicopter that it had severe damage in its hydraulics. This meant that there were only five helicopters available for the mission, so Operation Blue Light had to be called off by order of President Carter. There was no longer enough time to bring in other helicopters from the "Nimitz." There was barely even enough time to return under cover of night.

After the order for the return was given, a catastrophic collision took place. One helicopter taking off in the darkness struck one of the transport planes that was standing on the ground. Both aircraft caught fire and then the munitions on board exploded.

There are also other versions of this collision:

The helicopter is said to have crossed the path of a transport plane that was taking off. Or the helicopter may have made a too-narrow loop as it was attempting to refuel and in doing so its blades grazed the C-130 loaded with fuel.

Now there was also the danger that the four intact helicopters at any time could explode.

In this chaos Colonel Charles Beckwith decided to sacrifice the helicopters. The soldiers jumped into the remaining Hercules transport plane and then took off as quickly as possible. In the panic they forgot to bring with them the secret invasion plans that had been left behind in the remaining helicopters. The eight team members who had died in the burning airplane also had to be left behind.

Later the Iranian Air Force bombarded the helicopters left on the desert air strip with the justification that it was in order to prevent the Americans from seizing them again. During the bombardment some of the helicopters were destroyed, a member of the Revolutionary Guard was killed, and two others were wounded as they were attempting to retrieve the documents and plans that had been left behind. For this reason it is thought that the true purpose of the bombardment was to destroy these documents and that there are secret collaborators in the Iranian Air Force.

#### Later Stages of the Apparent Liberation Operation

There is no official confirmation of further phases to this undertaking, but they have been theoretically sketched out in the press.

If everything had gone according to plan, the helicopters would have flown from "Camp 1" set up at the desert air strip near Tabas to "Camp 2," which was supposed to be established in the mountains near Tehran. The conditions would not allow for the possibility of a direct helicopter landing on the Embassy grounds. Motor vehicles had been placed at an advance base by internal collaborators, as well as other equipment and additional available troops.

On the night of the 26th of April the special commandos were then supposed to drive through Tehran to take over the Embassy. One of the commandos was supposed to free the three hostages at the Foreign Ministry and bring them to the Embassy. The commandos were to return from the Embassy with the freed hostages to the mountain base. From there the helicopters were to fly on to "Camp 3," an air strip in the area of the Caspian Sea. Finally, the commandos and the hostages were to be flown by transport plane out of the country.

The full liberation plan has been developed in recent weeks by experts from the specially established "Escape Division" at the US Central Intelligence Agency, as well

as military expert and officials from the Department of State (with particular knowledge about the local circumstances in the occupied Embassy). A key figure of the undertaking is supposed to have been a CIA agent with the cover name Lady Windermere.

He apparently had the task of tossing psychotropic drugs from a secret CIA laboratory out of a helicopter with Iranian markings onto the extensive grounds of the Embassy. This "nerve gas" can apparently "reverse the polarity" of any person who comes into contact within a fraction of a second from aggression to meekness.

During this phase two separate liberation groups were supposed to enter Embassy: US Marine Infantry in Iranian Army uniforms, and a number of US soldiers who appear Iranian, as well as Iranians friendly to the USA, who had previously loudly demonstrated at the gates of the Embassy. Also participating in the operation were 125 members of the former Imperial Guard flown in with the Delta Team, who since fleeing the country had been trained in Egypt.

Together with the captured guards, the 53 American hostages were then to be flown out of the country. This was to leave the impression that the entire operation had been a self-organized "repudiation" of the hostages in a different place by the Iranians who had occupied the Embassy.

At the beginning of the operation there were bombs that had been stationed in various parts of Tehran that were to detonate. This was to create great confusion and distract from the events at the Embassy.

In an extreme circumstance the deployment of airplanes from the area of the Persian Gulf was anticipated. The aircraft carriers "Nimitz" and "Coreal Sea" had 42 F-4 interceptor jets standing by. There were also 40 A-7 assault planes.

In the event of a deployment of the assault aircraft there was a plan to take out the Iranian Air Force, to bombard strategic targets in the area of Tehran, and a defensive fire barrier for the commandos and hostages. This would have been associated with civilian casualties.

#### The Preparations for the Military Operation

The possibility of a military operation was mentioned by the government as early as 4.11.1979.

On November 9th Carter ordered his National Security Advisor, Brzezinski to work together with Secretary of Defense Brown, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Jones, and Vice President Mondale to develop proposals for possible military measures. Within ten days the plans were presented. These also included the then-preferred "Blue Light" proposal. On January 8, 1980 Carter clearly declared before the members of Congress, "I believe that the majority of people who have studied the situation, looked at the map, and seen where the Embassy is situated in Tehran, can recognize that a task force or a military operation to free the hostages would almost certainly fail and almost certainly end with the death of the hostages.

But from January onward the Delta Force also trained for the liberation of the hostages from Tehran. At a secret location in Turkey the entire 110,000 square meter large complex of the US Embassy in Tehran was faithfully reconstructed for this purpose out of wood, plaster, and prefabricated components. The special forces practiced the landing operation near Tabas in the salt deserts of Utah in the USA, where conditions are approximately 20 times more difficult.

The plan of the American President to free the hostages in Iran was held so strictly secret in Washington that only the soldiers immediately involved, a few men in the White House, and only three people in the Department of Defense knew about it. In the Pentagon the people who had worked on the operation were separated in the war room, so that they could not compile enough pieces of the puzzle to know what they were actually doing. Only Defense Secretary Brown, his deputy Clayton, and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jones, knew the full details.

The NATO Allies were surprised by the US Military Operation

The European allies of the United States were not informed about the planned operation to free the hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran. A NATO spokesperson said on April 25th that there were no consultations with the partners in the alliance.

Government spokesperson Bölling explained before journalists that the West German government was not informed about the intentions and received the first details from the American President's briefing. The German Chancellor learned of the operation through a message from intelligence services.

Great Britain, on the other hand, was briefed by the United States about a possible operation to rescue the American hostages in Tehran. As the Deputy British Foreign Minister, Sir Ian Gilmour, emphasized on April 25th in the House of Commons, London was not consulted before the now failed liberation attempt. The British government was only informed "about the possibility of a rescue."

The French Foreign Ministry declared that the government was not briefed about the operation ahead of time. In Israel the failed undertaking came as a shock. Former President Rabin declared on Israeli television that it is incredible that such an operation could fail because of a helicopter, after the US President had made the decision to undertake the operation with all its political and international consequences. Other critics address the unconditional faith of the Americans in their technology and the trust in far advanced specialization of planning. Task force troops received plans that were well-developed in every detail by experts. Should the actual situation deviate from the planning, the troops--no longer trained for improvisation--would react rashly.

In the FRG the corresponding "war games" are said to have been carried out by the GSG 9 task force for the liberation of the hostages in Tehran. Security experts noted that the American undertaking seriously threatened the lives of the hostages through external military operations. It would have been better for political reasons to have drawn in allies, at least by informing them of the undertaking.

Technical and Organizational Deficiencies of the Operation

Further details have been uncovered about the deficiencies already mentioned in the preparation and carrying out of the military operation:

- Technical defects in three helicopters
- At least twelve specialists were missing
- Insufficient air surveillance at "Camp 1"
- There were no plans for a catastrophic situation during the helicopter refueling
- Insufficient precautions for the destruction of material, documents, and mission plans in the helicopters left behind

The Department of Defense confirmed that the sand filters had been removed from the turbines on the eight helicopters, in order to increase their capacity by about three percent (two of the helicopters failed during the operation because of defects in their hydraulic systems, and one because of a breakdown in its compass. But with fewer than six helicopters it was no longer possible to carry out the operation). Experts are of the opinion that the flight at low heights over a desert area and in a sandstorm was too reckless under these circumstances. Other experts point to the fact that the turbines would not have failed. Apparently the maintenance teams on the "Nimitz" aircraft carrier did not know the mission of the eight helicopters. No particularly careful maintenance took place for the 800 kilometer long-distance flight.

As the New York Post reported, four of the eight helicopters were accidentally sprayed with fire extinguishing chemicals shortly before the flight, which could have damaged the hydraulic system. It has furthermore been confirmed that of all the helicopters, the one that returned to the aircraft carrier because of orientation difficulties was the only one that had tools on board for hydraulic damage. A contributing factor for the failure of one helicopter was also the negligence of a soldier whose jacket was caught in one of the turbine the intake vents.

During the return after the collision of the helicopter with a transport plane several secret documents and high-tech electronic equipment could not be destroyed anymore because of the munitions that were used. Equipment and papers have presumably fallen into the hands of Iran undamaged.

#### A Possible, Far-reaching Objective of the Operation

It is thought that the failed American task force undertaking in Iran was not in order to free the hostages, but a preparation for a CIA coup. The former Minister President Bachtiar installed by the Shah was to serve as a puppet in the role of a "Government Head of a Free Area in Iran."

In a declaration of the Central Committee of the Iranian Tudeh Party the following statement is made: "The military invasion of Iran by the USA is a link in the chain of a comprehensive and dangerous oath against the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran." (ND, 29.4.1980).

The Iranian President Bani Sadr declared that by weakening the new Iranian authority the aggression has laid the groundwork for a "sneaking coup d'etat."