

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to improve US counterterrorist (CT) capability through an independent appraisal of the hostage rescue mission, including a broad examination of its planning, organization, coordination, direction, and control. The scope of the study addresses the broader aspects of conceptual validity and operational feasibility; the planning environment, including operations security (OPSEC), policy guidance, and options available, adequacy of planning, resources, preparation, and support; and overall conduct of the executed portion of the mission.

Mission

Rescue mission planning was an ongoing process from 4 November 1979 through 23 April 1980. The planners were faced with a continually changing set of circumstances influenced mainly by the uncertain intentions of the hostages' captors and the vacillating positions of the evolving Iranian leadership. The remoteness of Tehran from available bases and the hostile nature of the country further complicated the development of a feasible operational concept and resulted in a relatively slow generation of force readiness.

Analysis

In analyzing the planning, training, and execution of the hostage rescue mission, the review group identified 23 discrete issues that were investigated in depth. Eleven were considered to be major issues, ones that had an identifiable influence on the outcome of the hostage rescue effort or that should receive the most careful consideration at all levels in planning for any future special operation.

Issues

The major issues, which underlie the subsequent conclusions, are listed below:

OPSEC.

Independent review of plans.

Organization, command and control.

Comprehensive readiness evaluation.

Size of the helicopter force.

Overall coordination of joint training.

Command and control at Desert One.

Centralized and integrated intelligence support external to the Joint Task Force (JTF).

Alternatives to the Desert One Site.

Handling the dust phenomenon.

C-130 pathfinders.

Specific Conclusions

The major issues provide the basis for the following specific conclusions:

The concept of a small clandestine operation was valid and consistent with national policy objectives. It offered the best chance of getting the hostages out alive and the least danger of starting a war with Iran.

The operation was feasible. It probably represented the plan with the best chance of success under the circumstances, and the decision to execute was justified.

The rescue mission was a high-risk operation. People and equipment were called on to perform at the upper limits of human capacity and equipment capability.

The first realistic capability to successfully accomplish the rescue of the hostages was reached at the end of March.

OPSEC was an overriding requirement for a successful operation. Success was totally dependent upon maintaining secrecy.

Command and control was excellent at the upper echelons, but became more tenuous and fragile at intermediate levels. Command relationships below the Commander, JTF, were not clearly emphasized in some cases and were susceptible to misunderstandings under pressure.

External resources adequately supported the JTF and were not a limiting factor.

Planning was adequate except for the number of backup helicopters and provisions for weather contingencies. A larger helicopter force and better provisions for weather penetration would have increased the probability of mission success.

Preparation for the mission was adequate except for the lack of a comprehensive, full-scale training exercise. Operational readiness of the force would have benefited from a full-dress rehearsal, and command and control weaknesses probably would have surfaced and been ironed out.

Two factors combined to directly cause the mission abort: Unexpected helicopter failure rate and low-visibility flight conditions en route to Desert One.

The siting of Desert One near a road probably represented a higher risk than indicated by the JTF assessment.

General Conclusions

Although the specific conclusions cover a broad range of issues relating to the Terms of Reference, two fundamental concerns emerge in the review group's consensus which are related to most of the major issues:

The ad hoc nature of the organization and planning. By not utilizing an existing JTF organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to start, literally, from the beginning to establish a JTF, create an organization, provide a staff, develop a plan, select the units, and train the force before the first mission capability could be attained. An existing JTF organization, even with a small staff and cadre units, would have provided an organization framework of professional expertise around which a larger tailored force organization could quickly coalesce.

OPSEC. Many things that, in the opinion of the review group, could have been done to enhance mission success were not done because of OPSEC considerations. The review group considers that most of these alternatives could have been incorporated without an adverse OPSEC impact had there been a more precise OPSEC plan selectively exercised and more closely integrated with an existing JTF organization.

Recommendations

These conclusions lead the group to recommend that:

A Counterterrorist Joint Task Force (CTJTF) be established as a field agency of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with permanently assigned staff personnel and certain assigned forces.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff give careful consideration to the establishment of a Special Operations Advisory Panel, comprised of a group of carefully selected high-ranking officers (active and/or retired) who have career backgrounds in special operations or who have served at the CINC or JCS levels and who have maintained a current interest in special operations or defense policy matters.