

Crisis in Iran: Operation EAGLE CLAW

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DATES: December 8, 1978–April 25, 1980

LOCATION: Iran

OVERSEAS BASES USED: Hellenikon Air Base (AB), Athens, Greece; Masirah Island, Oman; Mehrabad Airport, Tehran, Iran

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

| NUMBERED AIR FORCE: | WINGS: |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Twenty-First | 1st Special Operations |
| | 436th Military Airlift |
| DIVISION: | 437th Military Airlift |
| 322d Airlift | 438th Military Airlift |

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: C-5, C-141, EC-130, MC-130

Operations

In the mid-1970s, Islamic fundamentalists, urged on by the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, grew more and more dissatisfied with the leadership, reforms, and government of Iran, under Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. In August 1978, approximately 44,000 Americans, including 700 military members, 250 defense department employees, and 8,000 defense-related contractor personnel lived in Iran. In early December, when antigovernment demonstrations in Iran began to threaten the well-being of U.S. military dependents in the country, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed the Military Airlift Command (MAC) to fly out dependents wishing to leave Iran. Consequently, on December 8–9, the Twenty-First Air Force flew 2 C-5 and 9 C-141 special assignment airlift missions carrying 903 persons from Mehrabad Airport in Tehran, the capital of Iran, to bases in the United States and Germany. Throughout the remainder of the month, violence and disorder mounted, leading the U.S. Department of State to

recommend that all American dependents leave the country. By the end of December, the JCS, at the request of the Secretary of State, directed MAC to provide space-available seating on scheduled MAC flights from Iran to dependents of American citizens. In response, MAC increased the number of regularly scheduled missions to Tehran to two a day. C-5s and C-141s flew these missions equipped with the maximum number of seats. The airlift continued throughout January 1979 amidst further demonstrations, strikes, and general turmoil.

The Shah fled the country on January 16 and Khomeini triumphantly returned on February 1. He appointed a government four days later and began to transform Iran into a theocratically ruled Islamic state. In addition to draconian domestic measures, he completely abandoned the Shah's pro-Western orientation and adopted a foreign policy of absolute hostility toward the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In February, an estimated 1 million people demonstrated in Tehran, and at least 500 died in a clash between factions.

As a result of this turmoil, the U.S. Department of State ordered increased efforts to evacuate all American dependents and nonessential industrial and military personnel from Iran. On February 8, MAC added more missions to the scheduled flights from Tehran. On February 10, the Iranians closed Mehrabad Airport, forcing suspension of airlift operations. Altogether, between December 9, 1978, and February 10, 1979, 34 C-5 and 87 C-141 flights airlifted 5,732 passengers, 687 tons of cargo, and 169 pets from Tehran. On February 11, in anticipation of a possible requirement to provide additional U.S. military support for evacuation operations in Iran, the JCS ordered MAC's Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) to deploy six HH-53 helicopters and five HC-130 tankers from Royal Air Force Woodbridge, United Kingdom, to Incirlik AB, Turkey. The JCS also tasked the Commander in Chief, Atlantic Command, to deploy to Incirlik AB one combat-equipped Marine infantry detachment that could reinforce the U.S. Embassy compound in Tehran during an evacuation. Furthermore, in case an immediate evacuation became necessary, MAC ordered six C-141 aircraft at Athens, Greece, on alert.

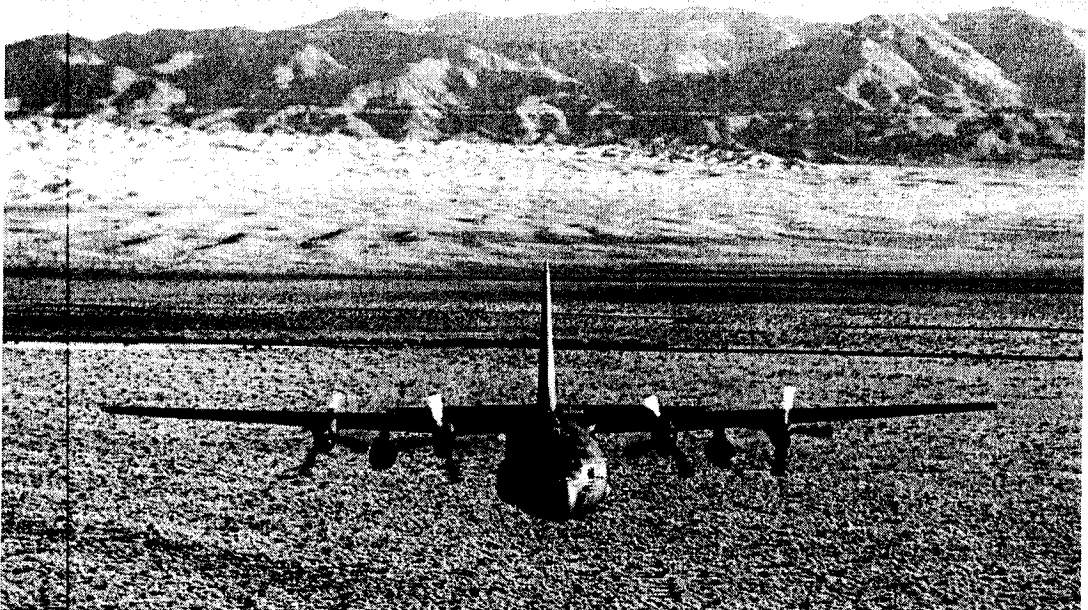
On February 13, the JCS ordered the Marine detachment to stay at Lajes AB, Azores, on alert, prepared for further deployment within three hours following notification. The JCS also directed the ARRS task force to remain at Sigonella, Italy, pending further guidance. The next morning, armed guerrillas stormed the U.S. Embassy compound in Tehran and seized 102 Americans hostage until Khomeini security forces, responding to U.S. requests for assistance, returned the embassy to U.S. control. After this action, the JCS directed the ARRS task force to leave Italy and proceed to Incirlik. The government of Turkey, however, stipulated that the aircraft arrive with no weapons or military equipment aboard, that the helicopters depart for Iran with the permission of the Iranian government, and that the helicopters be used to evacuate only U.S. personnel and their families. The JCS did not order the emergency evacuation force to Iran. On February 17, the Iranian government reopened Mehrabad Airport, and MAC flew its final evacuation mission—a C-141 that airlifted sixty-nine passengers to Athens. Between February 17 and 26, 13 commercial Boeing 747 missions chartered by the state department airlifted 4,099 more passengers from Tehran to cities in Europe and the continental United States. By March 1, the United States decided to airlift out of Tehran all but skeletal staffs at the embassy and at some corporate headquarters.

The tension continued to mount. Hardly a day passed without some manifestation of anti-American sentiment. News broadcasts, demonstrations, speeches in Parliament, and venomous pronouncements from the Ayatollah reflected this attitude. Khomeini blamed the United States and the "great Satan," U.S. President James E. Carter, for Iran's troubles. In May 1979, a crowd of 150,000 gathered at the U.S. Embassy chanting "death to Carter." Despite this activity, President Carter, in an effort to maintain contact with Iran, did not recall American Foreign Service personnel. Meanwhile, the Shah, diagnosed with cancer, requested treatment in the United States. Acting against the advice of almost all of his advisors, President Carter allowed the Shah to enter the United States for surgery and radiation treatment at the New York-Cornell Medical Center. The deleterious effect of this decision became painfully clear on November 4, 1979, when the

Iranians seized the American embassy and took fifty-three U.S. diplomatic personnel hostage. For the remainder of his presidency, Carter worked to free these citizens. The United States tried diplomatic initiatives, the seizure of Iranian assets, economic sanctions, and passive military air and naval deployments—all failed.

From the first day of the crisis, the National Security Council discussed military options such as the seizure of Iranian oilfields, retaliatory bombing, mining of harbors, total blockade, various covert operations, and a rescue attempt. President Carter eventually decided to go with the rescue attempt. This decision caught the JCS by surprise. The United States lacked bases and other resources in the area. Intelligence sources in Iran had disappeared after the revolution. Operationally, the United States did not have a force to conduct the rescue or contingency plans for it. After five months of intensive preparation, a complicated operational rescue plan emerged. It involved eleven groups of men drawn from the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The President and his military advisors approved the plan and ordered its execution.

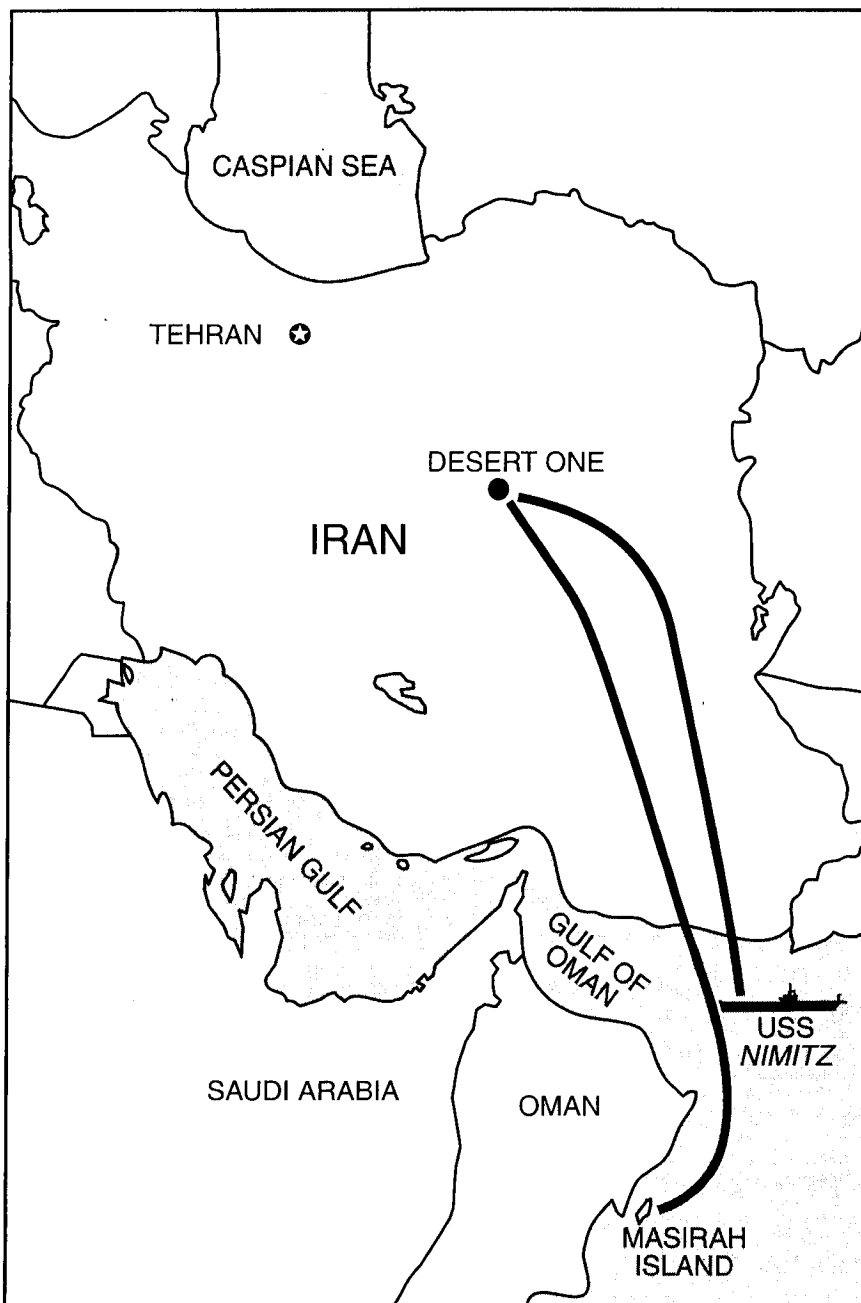
The operation, known as EAGLE CLAW, called for 3 MC-130s to carry an assault force of 118 troops from the island of



MC-130 flying low over a desert.

Masirah, off the coast of Oman, to Iran, landing 200 miles southeast of Tehran at a desolate, uninhabited location called Desert One. Unfortunately, this site was very close to a highway. Accompanying the MC-130s would be three fuel-bearing EC-130s. After landing in the desert, they would wait for the eight RH-53D helicopters from the carrier USS *Nimitz*, located in the Gulf of Oman. These would arrive approximately thirty minutes after the last C-130 had landed. The commanders and planners agreed that a minimum of six helicopters would be required to carry out the mission. They sent eight helicopters so that if anything went wrong with two, they would still have the minimum number. The helicopters would then refuel from the EC-130s and load the assault force. The C-130s would return to Masirah while the RH-53s proceeded to the assault force's hiding site. The helicopters would unload the troops, then proceed to a separate site fifteen miles to the north in the hills, where they would hide during daylight.

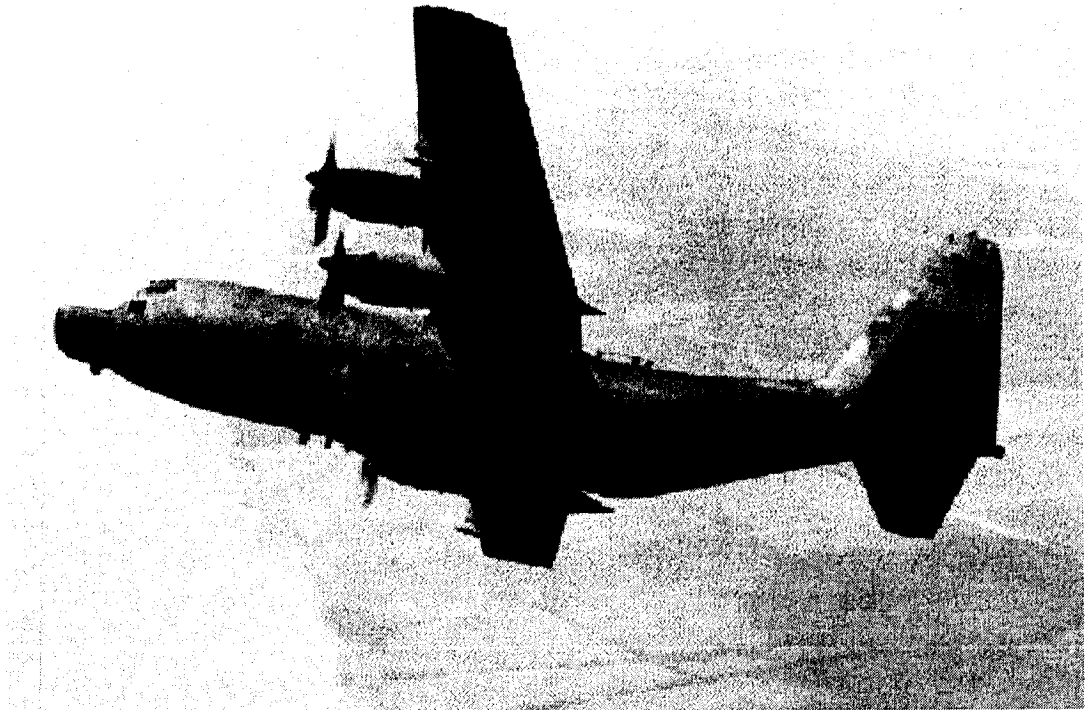
Meanwhile, two agents, who would have been placed in Iran several days before, would rendezvous with the assault force and lead the troopers five miles overland to a remote wadi sixty-five miles southeast of Tehran. There they would hide until dark. The agents would then leave, obtain a pickup truck and a passenger van, return to the site, and transport six drivers and six translators to a warehouse in Tehran where six enclosed Mercedes trucks were stored. The drivers and translators would pick up the Mercedes trucks, return to the hiding site, pick up the assault force, and enter Tehran. While the main assault force drove through Tehran to the embassy compound, a thirteen-man assault team, using the van, would rescue three hostages being held in the Foreign Ministry Building. Upon arriving at the embassy, the assault force, divided into three elements, would neutralize the outside guards, scale the embassy wall, enter the compound, neutralize the interior guards, locate and secure the hostages, and determine if helicopters could land within the embassy grounds. If no obstacles existed, one helicopter would land, pick up the hostages, and fly them to Manzariyeh, an airport approximately thirty-five miles south of Tehran. The rest of the helicopters would then pick up the assault force. If obstacles existed and could not be removed, the assault force would blow a hole in the embassy wall, and lead the hostages



Iran and Persian Gulf during Hostage Rescue Attempt

to a nearby soccer stadium where the helicopters could accomplish the airlift.

While the assault force conducted the rescue operations in Tehran, a U.S. Army Ranger contingent would fly in, take, and secure the airfield at Manzariyeh. They would hold the field until the helicopters arrived from Tehran. Once everyone arrived at Manzariyeh, all of the hostages, drivers, translators,



MC-130 of the type used in the rescue attempt.

helicopter crews, agents, Special Forces personnel, and the assault force would be airlifted out of Iran on C-141 aircraft. The Rangers would then destroy any American equipment left on the field and fly out.

On April 24, 1979, the first MC-130 launched from the island of Masirah. It carried the ground and air commanders, a team tasked to block the highway, and one of the assault elements. The other five C-130s would follow one hour later. As the first MC-130 crossed the Iranian coast, it dropped to 400 feet to avoid enemy radar. At approximately the halfway point, the air commander received word that the eight helicopters had launched from the *Nimitz*. After landing successfully at Desert One, team members unloaded the equipment. Before they could block the highway, a bus approached the landing zone. The blocking force fired on the bus, stopped it, and detained forty-five Iranians. Before this incident ended, an Iranian gasoline-tanker truck came down the road. When it did not stop, the troopers launched an M72 LAW (light antitank

weapon), igniting the truck. Finally, when a small pickup truck approached, the driver evidently sensed the danger, turned around, and fled. The U.S. ground commander decided to continue the mission, and the first MC-130 took off to return to Masirah.

The second MC-130 landed shortly afterward. The burning tanker truck served to light the area, while the troopers unloaded this aircraft. It then taxied onto the rough airstrip and took off for the return flight to Masirah. In short order, one more MC-130 and the three EC-130s landed in the desert and took their positions with engines idling to wait for the helicopters.

At first, the helicopter mission bordered on normal, but approximately two hours after take-off, one crew received cockpit indications of an impending rotor-blade failure. The crew landed, verified the malfunction, and abandoned their aircraft. A companion aircraft landed, picked up the crew, and continued the mission. Approximately one hour later, the pilots saw what appeared to be a fog bank several miles ahead. However, it turned out to be the first of several large layers of desert dust and sand. When the RH-53s flew into this mess, they encountered a cyclonic dust storm. Intense winds buffeted the aircraft, and visibility dropped so that the pilots could not see the ground from as low as seventy-five feet, nor could they see the other aircraft. The helicopters immediately separated and proceeded individually to Desert One. The pilots described the experience as flying in a darkened milk bowl. With no visual references, the pilots, wearing night-vision goggles, flew on instruments, at low-level, in the dark, through the turbulent winds. Several experienced vertigo but successfully kept their aircraft in the air. As the flight continued, another helicopter experiencing navigation and flight-instrument problems, decided to abort and return to the *Nimitz*. This left six helicopters proceeding to Desert One. During the long flight across the desert, a third helicopter experienced hydraulic problems, continued the mission, hoping the problem could be fixed on landing.

Meanwhile, at Desert One, the ground forces waited impatiently. They needed to refuel the helicopters, board them, and fly to the hiding site before daylight, and time was running out. Finally, an hour to an hour and a half late, the helicopters

began arriving. The ground commander realized that part of the mission would have to be flown in daylight; still he decided to continue. He ordered the assault force to board the helicopters. Simultaneously, the Americans began loading the detained Iranians on board the MC-130 for evacuation to the Manzariyeh Airport. While the assault force boarded the RH-53s, the pilot of the helicopter with hydraulic problems conferred with the helicopter commander. They concluded that the aircraft could not be fixed at Desert One and would have to be abandoned. This decision left five mission-ready helicopters. These were not enough. When notified that he had only five helicopters, the ground commander decided to cancel the rescue mission. He notified his commander in Egypt, who in turn forwarded the recommendation through the chain of command to President Carter, who reluctantly approved.

At Desert One, noise, dust, and confusion prevailed. The commanders decided to refuel the helicopters so that they could return to the *Nimitz* and load the assault force on the C-130s to return them to Masirah Island. The desert floor rocked from the roaring engines of four C-130 and five RH-53 aircraft, and dust and sand flew everywhere. While the burning tanker truck cast an eerie glow, the assault force began loading onto the C-130s for evacuation. The helicopters had moved near the EC-130s to refuel when suddenly disaster struck. Evidently, a rotary blade on one of the helicopters struck an EC-130. The resultant explosion destroyed both aircraft and endangered the other nearby aircraft. Eight men died. The commanders decided to load everyone on the remaining C-130s and abandon the four functional helicopters. As quickly as possible, the troopers and helicopter crews boarded the Hercules, which took off for Masirah. The mission had tragically failed. Although President Carter continued to work to free the hostages, the Iranians held them captive until January 20, 1981.

When the news broke, critics attacked everything from the plan to the maintenance of the helicopters, but the major factors contributing to the failure were the unexpected dust storm and the lack of backup helicopters. However, even in those areas, there were extenuating circumstances. The United States had no way to insert meteorologists into the

Iranian desert to predict or warn about dust storms. The *Nimitz* could not carry any more helicopters in its hangar nor could any be carried on the deck for fear that Soviet satellites would detect them and the Iranians would be warned. Perhaps the most significant result of the Iranian operation was the eventual formation of the U.S. Special Operations Command and its USAF component, the Air Force Special Operations Command. The military had learned that especially in operations of this type, where personnel were drawn from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, joint planning and joint training were crucial. The U.S. Special Operations Command provides the forum and structure for continuous planning and training.