

Inflection Point, Changing Naval Air Training and Tactics

Bobby Goodman

Introduction

Every generation or two something in the world changes that forces significant changes in Naval Aviation tactics and training. One such event occurred on December 4, 1983. This event could reasonably be construed as the first in a series of Islamic terrorism events that would dominate international news and U.S. Government investment for many decades to follow. This is the story of that event told by Bobby Goodman, then a Lieutenant flying the A-6E Intruder, who ended up in the middle of the event. During the December 4th strike, the participants were unknown to then LT Goodman, his preparation inappropriate and the strike results insignificant for the ill-defined purpose of the strike. However, the changes made to tactics, training and the Code of Conduct in the aftermath of the strike would establish a Navy of phenomenal capability and awe-inspiring effectiveness.

Geopolitical Setting

Lebanon had long been in the throes of civil war; it began in earnest in 1976 as Christian East Beirut was ringed by heavily fortified Palestinian camps and became besieged by the PLO camps. This situation was remedied by the combined efforts of the Kataeb Party (also called Phalange) and their allied Christian militias; together they besieged the Palestinian camps embedded in Christian East Beirut.

On June 6, 1982 the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) invaded Lebanon in "Operation Peace for Galilee," for the purpose of rooting out PLO guerillas from the southern part of Lebanon. Between September 16 - 18, 1982, a militia close to the Phalange, a predominantly Christian Lebanese right-wing party, massacred between 460 and 3,500 civilians, mostly Palestinian and Lebanese Shiites, living in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut. The widespread massacre was carried out in plain sight of the IDF, its ally. The IDF received reports of some of the Phalange atrocities in Sabra and Shatila but did not take any action to prevent or stop the massacre.

After the Israeli invasion, many Christian civilians, having fled the city earlier in the war, returned to Beirut. However, soon after, clashes broke out between the Lebanese Forces and the Druze militias, who had now taken over the districts and had earlier kicked out the Christian inhabitants. The main Druze militiamen came from the Progressive Socialist Party in alliance with the Syrian Army and Palestinian militants who had not departed Lebanon in 1982.

Into this confusing conflict of state and non-state actors, the United Nations inserted a Multi-National Peace Keeping Force, headquartered in Beirut. They started out patrolling all of Beirut, but as conditions deteriorated, they soon found themselves holed up at the Beirut

International Airport. As the action focused in Beirut, so did the intelligence briefings, mostly ignoring conditions in the surrounding areas where strikes likely were to be conducted.



At that time, CTF-60, the senior of two carrier battle group commanders stationed in the Mediterranean Sea, was onboard USS Dwight D. Eisenhower with Carrier Air Wing Seven embarked. Eisenhower and CVW-7 operations during that deployment had almost exclusively been dedicated to supporting Multi-national Peacekeeping Force ashore in Beirut. The ship had arrived in Naples for a short and extremely rare port call late in the previous week.

When people reported to work on Monday, October 24th they all were shocked to see photographs of the destroyed barracks and simply numb at the loss of so many U.S. military personnel. Eisenhower sailed for the eastern Mediterranean in the early morning hours of Tuesday, October 25th. Soon Israelis were flying strikes into Lebanon/Syria via direct overflight of our carrier battle groups, both of which were almost permanently stationed in the Eastern Mediterranean miles off Beirut, making it unclear to the Syrians whose aircraft were inbound.

Three things of interest happened in late November. USS Independence, with Carrier Air Wing Six embarked, relieved Eisenhower as the flag ship of Battle Force Sixth Fleet (CTF-60). Next, USS John F. Kennedy, with Carrier Air Wing Three embarked, relieved USS Forrestal as the second carrier battle group in the Mediterranean. Lastly, the U.S. announced an agreement between the U.S. and Israel to coordinate on the Lebanon challenge.

On the afternoon of December 3rd, several Carrier Air Wing Three F-14s received hostile fire from Syrian surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft guns during a reconnaissance flight over Lebanon/Syria. Predictably, another tasking message arrived later in the afternoon requiring strike planning for another set of targets in Lebanon, this time Syrian tanks and anti-aircraft in the Bekaa Valley, close to the Syrian border. Kennedy/Air Wing Three quickly dispatched a strike lead to coordinate with Independence/Air Wing Six.

Strike

In 1983 I was on the second cruise of my first squadron tour in Attack Squadron Eighty-five (VA-85). The squadron had cross decked from Air Wing 17 on the USS Forrestal to join Air wing Three on the USS John F. Kennedy in May 1983 for a two-month Northern Atlantic deployment. After completing a short turnaround, Kennedy deployed again, this time to the Mediterranean, on 27 September 1983. Air Wing Three at the time became an All-Grumman Airwing with two F-14 Tomcat Squadrons and an extra (two) A-6 Intruder Squadrons, the change was necessitated because CVW-3's A-7 squadrons were transitioning to the new F/A-18 aircraft.

We deployed in late September 1983 and, after a port visit in Rio de Janeiro Brazil, the battle group transited the Atlantic and conducted flight operations off the coast of Spain, then joined the Indy Battle group in the eastern Mediterranean.



When the squadron deployed with CVW 3 on the USS Kennedy (CV-67), I had accumulated about 600 flight hours and about 240 traps (carrier landings) in my short career.

Several weeks of contingency planning around targets in the Eastern Mediterranean followed, then Kennedy pulled into Haifa (I think November 28th (or 29th), my birthday is on Nov 30, I think we pulled out of Haifa on either the Dec 1st or the 2nd.

On the morning of 4 Dec 1983, I was awakened at 0430 by a roommate and told to go to CVIC to do some contingency strike planning. I was given some target satellite imagery of a command building with some tanks around it located in the hills of the Bekaa Valley around the village of Hammana, east of Beirut. I was crewed with Lt. Mark Lange, with whom I flown with many times. I was given some flight details like the ordnance load (six Mk 83' 1000lb general-purpose bombs), fusing, target area tactics, and delivery options. This went on for about 45 min to 1 hour when I realized that my morning was wasted and that I might not get a chance to have breakfast!

We were all planning in earnest as we had been during weeks prior to the strike. After weeks of nightly drills of planning strikes, only to learn they were not a go, this strike felt the same. We did not think this strike was different; different day, different target, all was the same; it is just another plannex!

At approximately 0545 we were told there would be a strike briefing at 0630 for a 0730 launch! As the briefing concluded, Mark went to the flight deck to assist other crews pre-fighting their aircraft while I awaited a specific aircraft assignment. We were assigned tail number 556, which was still being loaded with strike ordnance; the other aircraft were loaded with alert loads, i.e., flexible weapon loads that were not appropriate for any specific target but would be useable and could be returned to the ship so the weapons would not be wasted.



When I got to the flight deck it was a most beautifully clear day, like one you imagine for a flyoff at the end of a deployment. The avionics technicians (AQs) were turning the system as we strapped in. After launch we joined the overhead rendezvous with aircraft from the Independence and found our three-plane triad element in which we were dash three. As the strike group headed out, we had some difficulty keeping up as the other two aircraft were not as heavily loaded as we

were.

The entire flight over land was intended to only last about 15 minutes total, about seven minutes inbound in a continuous descent to clear the mountains east of Beirut, one turn to the target, drop our bombs, a hard 180 turn and egress back to the coast where we would again be “feet wet.” The tactic was a throwback to the Vietnam war days, an alpha strike involving 28 aircraft from two ships/air wings all attacking one target.

As we crossed the coast, I remember cinching my mask down very tightly. I saw lots of AAA fire and a SAM missile trail behind our aircraft. As the entire airborne strike package was on a single frequency, I heard an A-7 off target calling “I've been hit I'm getting out.” I scanned aft then forward and unexpectedly felt the aircraft violently jolt forward. The A-6 did not have command ejection at that time. I don't remember initiating the ejection sequence, so I do not recall how that



occurred. I only recall waking or becoming conscious on the ground as my watch and wedding ring were taken, and my hands were tied behind my back. I was placed what I thought was a truck and transported, I was partially conscious and remember being paraded as stops along the trip. During the trip I remember my fingers going numb from the ropes on my wrist. For some reason the idea of my fingers going numb from the ropes did not bother me, it was not until I felt my thumb going numb, did I protest to the captor next to me. In response he put his finger between by wrist and the rope to allow blood to flow to my fingers and thumbs. I now know this truck trip transported me from the Bekaa Valley target area to the City of Damascus. My preparation for captivity reflected the Navy's POW training based on the Vietnam war. My experience was to be dramatically different from what the prisoners of war experienced in Vietnam. First, as noted earlier, the area was in conflict involving both state and non-state actors. Our briefing focused only on the target; I had no idea whether the target was affiliated with a nation-state or one of the many of the warring factions. Next, I had no idea of my location nor the affiliation of my captors; they all wore non-descript uniforms, some wore civilian clothes.

For three days I was held in a basement cell. The cell was small, with heavy blankets on the floor, and one small light bulb near the ceiling. The door to the cell was left open. The cell was at the end of a long hallway, of what appeared to be cells on either side of the hallway.



They had taken my flight suit, and boots. I was left in my skivvies and my green VA-85 squadron tee-shirt. I was sore and dazed from the ejection, and spent time partially awake thinking, or sleeping. My thought focused on trying to assess my situation, plan and begin cataloging as much information as I could. I found this time very disorienting because I did not have my watch and without any clues would lose track of time. When I fell asleep, I

was not sure if it had been 5 min or 5 hours.

It was during this time period when I was interrogated several times. I was keenly aware of the "Code of Conduct", and stories of Jerimiah Denton and John McCain. I had been through SERE (Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape) training in Maine. I had begun to mentally prepare myself for at least a 6 month stay in captivity, 6 months seemed like period of time I could think my way through one week at a time. I knew if I had not been released in first 6 months, I would start to work on the second 6 months and so on.

On the second day during an interrogation that I noticed a photo of the Syrian President, Hafez al-Assad, on the wall. I recognized the photo and realized I must be in Syria, but still did not know who was holding me. As it turns out, I had been transported to Damascus, Syria. Since I had no idea of who exactly was holding me, I did not know how what they really wanted from me. The interrogations were basic, focused on the weapons the A-6 could carry, other crews on the strike and who I was bombing. Since I did not know who precisely was holding me, I was unsure what their objectives were during my interrogation. My dilemma was further complicated since the strike happened so unexpectedly that I had not sanitized my navigation (nav) bag. All kinds of information on the A-6 and its weapons were available to them. In fact, during one interrogation they had the contents of my nav bag laid out in front of the interrogator; since they spoke fluent English, they could obviously simply read the weapons cards for themselves, they had and know the answers to their questions. I lied, obfuscated, made things up and skirted the truth which made recalling the stories I told them quite challenging so I would not be caught in an obvious lie. At one point they asked me for the key names of the carrier and strike leadership, "Who was the strike commander?" I made up names... At other times they asked questions I honestly did not know, what is the range of an F-14 Phoenix missile? I was an A-6 BN, I have no idea. When appropriate I told the truth because they already had that information. As I noted above, they had my nav bag and my pocket checklist (PCL). He was flipping through my PCL and asked, what is the range of the Sidewinder Air to Air missile? I told them the answer, 2nm nose to nose, 3nm from the side, 4nm when in trail! I knew he had my sidewinder card from, so there is no advantage to lying

about something they already know. I decided to protect or be as vague as possible about information I thought was important, but not take abuse for information I knew they already had.

I was interrogated many times and as I said, they only asked basic questions. They weren't overtly physically aggressive; they were just persistent.

On the fourth day, I was brought up from the cell in the basement and interrogated in the large room. After approximately 30-45 min of questions, which were mostly rehash of previous questions. After a brief pause, I was taken into a small room next to the large room by several younger men, clearly more junior in civilian clothes. After I answered a question (with a lie), one of them hit me. It seemed clear he hit me out of personal frustration, not authorized by what appeared to be the more senior personnel in the large room. I knew immediately that he had exceeded his authority, it caused me to reflexively smile. I was never hit again. At that point, I honestly do not think the Syrian authorities knew what to do with me.

On the fourth day, I was shaved, given a haircut, given clean clothes and moved to what appeared to be a bedroom next to an office. Next to the bedroom through an open door was a lounge with a TV visible to me.

I was then visited by a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who asked about my condition "How are they treating you?" and the care I was receiving. He gave me messages from my family. He told me "We are working on your release, if we are not successful, I will visit again in three weeks."

At this juncture I knew the international community know where I was and following the Geneva Convention would be working on my release from captivity. I stayed in that room until I was released.

During the ejection I suffered a twisted knee, a broken rib, separated shoulder, broken tooth and an extremely bruised eye. My broken rib was the injury that hurt the most as it made it difficult to breathe and nearly impossible to sleep. Near the end of the first week, a young man who appeared to be a doctor and spoke particularly good English came to my room, and asked me about my injuries "Where does it hurt?" He was friendly and seemed genuinely interested in my health and care. At the end of this visit he offered me some medicine to ease the pain. I considered the risk of taking the unknown medicine offered, but after a short reflection decided to take the medicine and my injuries got better over time.

As the days passed by, I watched the TV, not understanding the language, but seeing mobs in the streets and images of American flags being burned. On one occasion, I recall seeing what looked like a news report, showing demonstrators in the street burning the American flag and effigies of Ronald Reagan. The tail of a crashed aircraft (A-7) protruding out of a burning house, with women crying. It made me wonder that if those demonstrators knew I was in their country as a captive, what would stop them from grabbing me and dragging me out into the street.

It was never clear to me that there was anyone specifically assigned to guard me. There were young men in civilian clothes in a room adjacent to the lounge, they appeared to be undercover policemen armed with semi-automatic pistols, who would occasionally come into the bedroom where I was being held to visit me. They came more for discussion on my private life, was I married, did I have kids, etc. It was sometimes unclear if they were working to improve their English or trying to pull military details out of me.

A few days later, my captors announced they were taking me out. It was not immediately clear where. They proceeded to wrap my head with a scarf and put me in the back seat of a small car in the middle between two captors. It was during this ride to the hospital, when I could squint between the wraps of the scarf and see car and their license plates. (SYR XXX), this confirmed I was indeed in Syria. Shortly after it became clear they were taking me to a hospital. I was seen by an older doctor who spoke some English. He again asked about my injuries They used a 1950s era X-RAY machine to assess my injuries.

Christmas cards

Early in the second week of my captivity, a several large boxes were delivered to the bedroom where I was staying, the boxes contained Christmas cards from America that had been organized in a drive by several organizations most notable Willard Scott, the weatherman from NBC national news. I was told I had more than 60,000 Christmas cards mailed to me. During the next several weeks I spent time opening Christmas card from people across the country. I remember thinking they are not going to mess with someone who has 60,000 personal friends. I kept those cards for many years after my return and my family and I opened everyone. I still have some of the items from those cards to this day.

Second Red Cross visit

Just before Christmas I was visited again by a representative from the ICRC as well as the Military Attaché. They came to check on me and brought a meal, and messages from the US Ambassador to Syria, Mr. Robert P. Paganelli to indicate they were still working on my release.

Release - Jesse Jackson or Michael or Reggie Jackson

Christmas 1983 came and went, with little sign of a release. I did not know that Reverend Jackson's delegation had met several top Syrian officials but had not succeeded in securing a face-to-face meeting with President Assad himself. On December 28 A group of men came to my room asked me, "Do you know Jackson? I asked Jesse, Michael or Reggie? Their English was a bit broken, so it was not clear to me what they were referring to. I was placed in the back of a car and after a short ride was taken to a room jammed full of news journalists and television cameras. At the front of the room was Reverend Jackson's delegation awaiting my arrival and conducting a news conference. I was overwhelmed by the bright lights from the mass of cameras and the crush of reporters. At one point during the questions a reporter asked, do you

know if anyone was killed during your strike? Reverend Jackson deflected the question noted that is not what we are here for and started a prayer.

After the flurry of the news conference, I was taken back to the bedroom, and wondered what was that all about? It seemed positive, but I did not want to get my hopes up for something immediate.



New Years Eve.

On New Year's Eve, several of the young men in the lounge next door were clearly celebrating and drinking excessively. They would come into the bedroom and offer me glasses of Rokia (Licorice flavored Brandy), I politely declined without offending. At midnight I could hear them and others, go outside and shoot their guns in the air, then you could hear the bullets coming down and hitting the tin roofs of the buildings. The night ended without incident.

On 2 January 1984, the US delegation was summoned to see the Syrian leader.

"He was serious, as we were, not strident, but still resolved to keep him (Goodman)," Jackson recalls. He told President Assad that their two countries were not at war and that the young airman was not a prisoner of war. And he suggested that releasing him would open the possibility of a channel of communications with Washington.

Early the next morning, without explanation, one of the guards woke me and told me to collect my things. I was taken outside, put in a car, and driven to a Damascus hotel where Jackson and his delegation were waiting.

Throughout my four weeks in captivity I had been careful to remain "on an even keel, not to get too excited or too depressed." Now, my luck had changed. As I sat in the back of the US military plane taking me home, everyone was celebrating my release.

Two days later both I stepped off the plane back in Washington where I was reunited with my family, and then was whisked off to be met by a beaming President Reagan at the White House. I was feted as an American hero – a role, he says, he still does not feel comfortable with.

"That's something I have never been able to reconcile. I didn't feel I had done something heroic. I look back on it as an interesting slice of time, but not something I conquered – rather as something I managed to get through."

CONUS Aftermath

When I arrived at the hotel there was a bustle of activity, with reporters and cameras from numerous international organizations. I changed into clothes Reverend Jackson's team had purchased for me to wear by guessing my size. When we got to the airport, the group was met by one of my squadron mates who had met the C-141 in Crete and helped to coordinate the flight plan through restricted airspace into Damascus.

Once the aircraft took off there was a cheer and feeling of significant relief. After a lot of celebrating with Reverend Jackson and the entourage who had been successful in my relief. After a time, I went to the front of the aircraft to talk to the flight crew to thank them. My squadron mate, gave me a complete Navy Service Dress Uniform borrowed from another buddy, again guessing it would be close to my size, to put on as I stepped off the aircraft in Washington DC. The C-141 landed in Wiesbaden, Germany. We switched to the Vice President's aircraft. We flew to Shannon Ireland for a fuel stop and then on to Washington DC. I stepped off the plane at Andrews AFB in full uniform at 0630 AM to a large crowd, a marching band and a microphone!

God Bless America

When we stepped off the aircraft, I had not prepared to immediately speak to a large crowd of cheering people. In fact, I am still surprised by the fact a large crowd of cheering people was there at all. The sequence of events during the next two days is a blur. I had not really slept since the night before being asked to gather my things before being escorted to the hotel, or during the overnight flight to Washington DC.

I was taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital for a physical examination and evaluation. Later that day my family and I, along with Reverend Jackson's family, were invited to the White House to meet with President Reagan. When we arrived, we were ushered into the cabinet room, after a few minutes we were ushered into the Oval office to meet President Reagan, Vice President George Bush, the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and the President Reagan's soon to be Chief of Staff Donald Regan. President Reagan was very cordial and relaxed, and told us a story of how the President's Resolute desk had been modified over time.

I remember thinking these are the most powerful men in the world and they are waiting on me! After a few minutes we walked from the Oval office out to the Rose Garden for a press conference.

When people look at the pictures of the press conference from the Rose Garden, they ask me "why does your father, standing between President Reagan and Reverend Jackson, have



such a scowl on his face, why was he so angry.” I tell them he was not angry; we just had the sun in our faces, it was still early morning!

SECNAV Visit

I spent three or four days in Washington DC, before returning home to Virginia Beach, VA those days were a complete blur of events. It may have been later that first day or early the next when I was invited to the pentagon for a series of visits with senior Navy leadership. During the visit to the pentagon, I had the opportunity to meet the John F Lehman the Secretary of the Navy.

I had met him briefly before at NAS Oceana, he was a reserve Naval Officer serving as an A-6 Bombardier Navigator (BN) and flying training missions out of NAS Oceana. I met him briefly during a squadron “Dining Out” event at the NAS Oceana Officers club.

On this day, I was escorted into his office at the Pentagon, we all went into large room and sat down on a couch, SECNAV sat down next to the couch in a chair and pulled it up close to me. He leaned forward and asked me quietly, what was your chaff setting? Without thinking too much I said 6-4-4-2. When I looked up, I could see more flag officers than I had ever seen in one place, and all paying attention to me, all leaning forward to hear my answer.



Chaff is small aluminum strips dispersed from the tail section of the aircraft as an anti-missile countermeasure. The setting is dialed into a small box on the right rear side of the BNs seat in the A-6. The setting for the box is a small detail one BN would ask another. It was not the first question I expected from the Secretary of the Navy. But it did put me at ease. We spent about 30 min chatting about one thing or another, all of which I do not remember, but vividly remember his first question to me to this day.

I had the occasion to cross paths with him again many years later, and he told me and others, the strike on Dec 4th, and the events surrounding the strike were among other reformation initiatives, the impetus for the stand-up of the Naval Strike Warfare Center (NSWC), also known as “Strike U,” and a large buildup of Naval Air Station Fallon, NV. Strike U became a mechanism for advanced airwing training and tactics development. During my second squadron tour in VA-36 I had the opportunity to graduate from SLATS (Strick lead Attack Training School) at Strike U.

Code of Conduct

In late January or early February 1984, after my return home to Virginia Beach, I received a call and was told to go to an Intelligence Center at NAS Oceana to debrief my experience. I was escorted into a theater type room with approximately 35 - 40 Senior Naval officers in the seats, with me at the center. The questioning began to focus on the differences between my experience as "a person in captivity of non-state actors" and those prisoners of war who had preceded me.

Later, learned the Department of Defense's Code of Conduct and Prisoner of War Training had been revised and upgraded, based on my experience in captivity. Additionally, the policy associated with the award of the Prisoner of War Medal only during declared conflict was revisited temporarily amended for my award.

Takeaways

When I reflect on those events some 37 years ago, I still feel incredibly blessed in four areas:

- 1) I survived an ejection from a damaged aircraft falling apart and tumbling at speeds greater than 450 knots. In the A-6 Aircraft the ejection seat is designed with an ejection charge that pushes the seat through the canopy overhead. I liken this ejection as similar to being shot out of a cannon, through a glass window into a Windstream at 4 times the speed of a cat 4 hurricane.
- 2) My captivity was mild by comparison to the previous Viet Nam era captives. I was treated humanely and treated with respect, my injuries were treated, and I was feed often more than I could eat.
- 3) I was released relatively quickly in less than 30 days of captivity.
- 4) In the aftermath of those events, I have often been humbled by the exclusively positive feedback I have received, from the most senior Navy leadership to casual civilians who remember this event and are complementary in how I handled myself in that situation.