With Memory of Failed Mission

Rick Newton of Green Beret Parachute Club touches down in Drop Zone Sicily.

he'll probably sit around with his stupid advisers and do nothing."

Save for friends and wives who noted members suddenly missing from the Mission Impossible commando team-nicknamed "Charlie's Angels" after its original commander, Col. Charles A. Beckwith—news of the clandestine desert incident hit the base yesterday in the predawn darkness.

A groggy Sgt. Morakan, a Karl Malden look-alike, rising for his early morning fitness run, flicked on his bedroom radio and caught the news bulletin: Eight American fighting men dead in Iran.

"I felt sick," he said today. "I felt like the fan of a football team that had first down on the 1-foot line . . . and couldn't score."

As America began to experience a resurgence of patriotism, Morakan had felt appreciated as a military man —for the first time since Vietnam. He said he knew if the military were called up to solve the hostage crisis, it would have wide popular support.

In the dark days of Vietnam, "the American public was our worst enemy," he said. "It was pretty demoralizing to sit in the combat zone, lose a lot of good friends, watch the enemy flag wave at home and draft demonstrators protest 'Little Johnny Jones' having to get his fanny off to war."

Morakan gritted his teeth and proudly wore his uniform when home on leave. "I dared any SOB to say something to me."

The youngest of nine children born to a Pennsylvania coal miner, Morakan saw the Army as his ticket out of the bleak future underground in Wilkes-Barre—and as a way to serve his country.

It was a decision he has never regretted. "You get so you drive on dedication, loyalty and an esprit," he said.

Warriors at Ft. Bragg Live

By Art Harris
and Joe Pichirallo
Washington Post Staff Writer

FORT BRAGG, N. C.; April 26—The wind whipped the dry red Carolina clay into a fine desert-like dust as the Green Berets at Drop Zone Sicily stared skyward at a comrade in trouble. Chief Warrant Officer Roy Warren, a grizzled, three-tour Vietnam veteran with 28 Army years under his belt, was spinning violently, his main parachute tangled.

Suddenly, a white emergency chute popped open and the chief floated toward a rendezvous with the swift-running currents of Little River Creek. A dark green Huey helicopter swooped low over the pine forest, plucked the soggy soldier from the water, and delivered him to the drop zone.

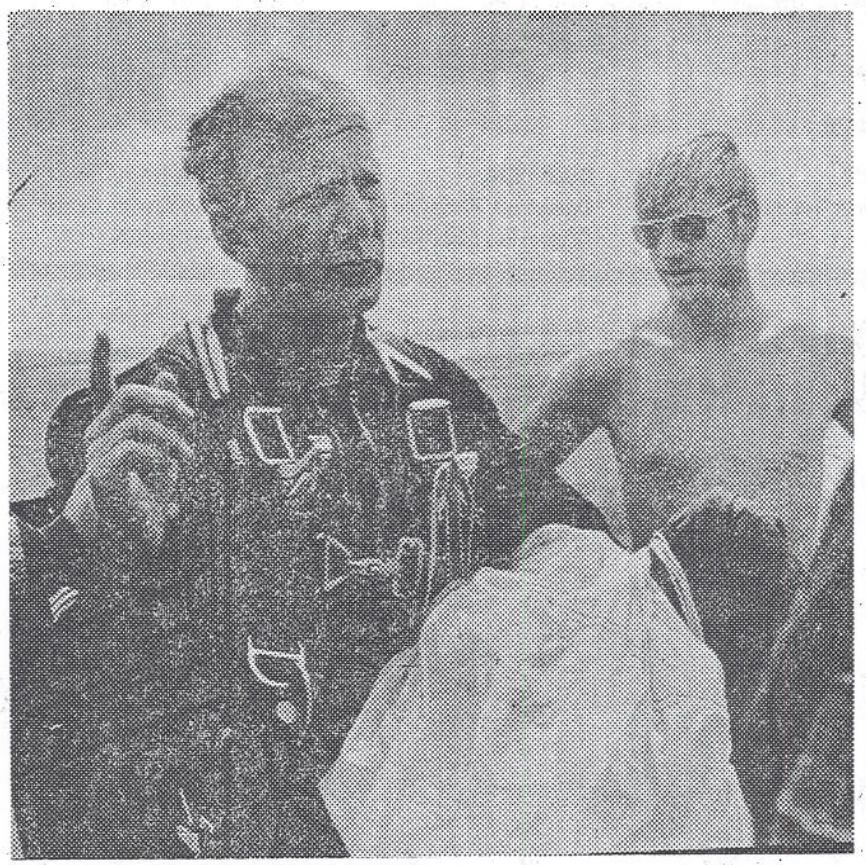
It was Warren's first equipment malfunction in 700 jumps, a near tragedy and an irritating reminder of the equipment failure that cost America eight lives last week and forced President Carter to scuttle a daring hostage rescue mission half-a-world away in Iran.

Warren and others on this sprawling military complex of 58,000—home of the elite Special Forces, the crack 82nd Airborne, and since 1978, the super-secret "Blue Light" antiterrorist unit that attempted the hostage rescue—grudgingly concede hat the mission to Iran failed. But the soldiers here lay the blame on machines, not the men who depended on them. Many, still smarting from the military's Vietnam-era image, are angry at any notion that soldiers should be blamed for the aborted Iranian effort.

"It's like sending the Olympic hockey team to Moscow and the plane crashes," said burly Green Beret Staff Sgt. John O'Neill, 25. "That doesn't mean the people on board couldn't do the job."

"Hell, no, it wasn't a military failure," snapped Sgt. Maj. Peter Morakan, a four-tour Vietnam combat veteran and one of the top enlisted men at the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, the special forces headquarters. "I got a chute right here, and it can malfunction just like the helicopters in Vietnam."

Morakan, a 30-year Army Man, wistful over an impending June retirement ("Soldiers are just a different breed of people,") and the others had just watched their Green Beret colleagues make a routine Saturday morning jump into the long-needle pine forests here.



By Thomas Babb for The Washington Post

Chief Warrant Officer Roy Warren, left, of Green Berets, and a Vietnam veteran, carries parachute gear in preparation for jump. At right is Tim Dannunizo.

A few feet away, a muscled 19-year-old Green Beret enlistee double-checked the ripcord on his parachute and scoffed at equipment failure as an excuse for a botched mission. "You've gotta have a backup plan. You've gotta allow for equipment failure. You don't go into combat with just five rounds. You know you'd run out of bullets."

Nonetheless, most soldiers on this base remain confident of their ability to do their jobs, anywhere, any time. The question for them it not should their commander-in-chief have ordered the base's elite 90-man Delta force into Iran, but when can they go again.

"Carter's been a weak-kneed SOB, but at least he finally did SOMETHING!" huffed a mustachioed Green Beret sergeant. "If we went back in within 72 hours, we could do it, but

"It's the challenge. Can I do it? Om I man enough to do it?"

Hours after the aborted rescue mission, a middle-aged ex-Green Beret leaned against the bar at the NCO club here, disappointment in his voice as he reflected on the day's events.

"I don't care what anybody says, the morale has got to be down," the sergeant major said. "Americans are taught to have a winning attitude. It's damn humiliating to have a little dinky-a--, two-bit country push us around."

"Where's Harry?" came the anxious voice in the early morning hours yesterday. A stepdaughter in California was calling Sgt. Harry Meyer, 45, a Green Beret, at his Fort Bragg home.

"He's home," said his wife, Donna.

She recalled the seconds of tension in her daughter's voice as she and her husband spent Saturday morning watching the Green Beret Parachute Club members touch down at Drop Zone Sicily.

"When something like this happens, you start thinking, 'Where has so-and-so been for the last three months?' " said Donna Meyer. "We know many people who have been missing from Fort Bragg for three months, but we don't know if they are missing there (Iran)."

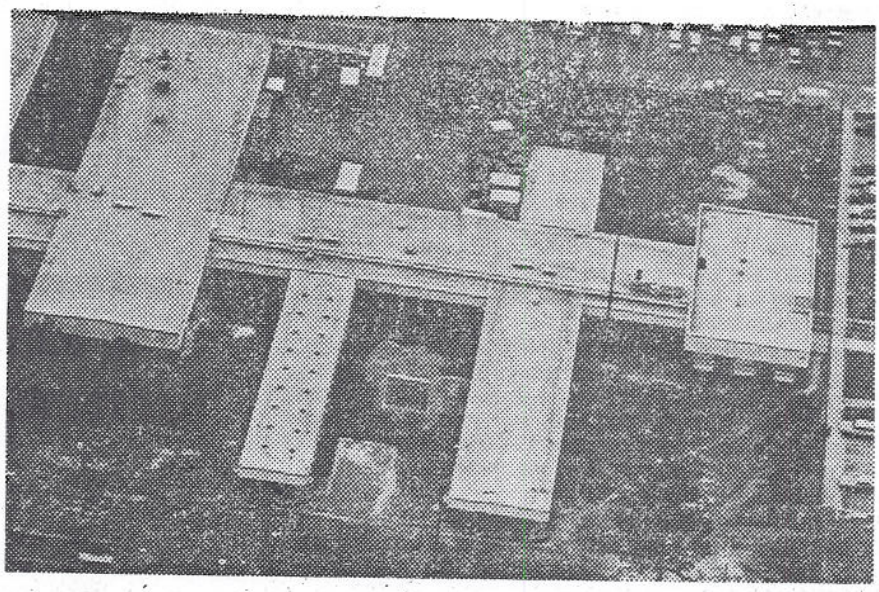
The Meyers both wore jeans, Addidas shoes and matching T-shirts to the parachute jump. His: "I'm looking for a 10." Hers: "Definitely a 10."

Had Harry Meyer been whisked off on some ultra-secret mission, his wife said she would not expect to know about it. "When your husband's in the Army, you don't ask questions," she said. "If he wanted me to know something, he'd tell me. I know several guys in Delta (the secret, antiterrorist strike force). They've been missing for a few months."

She said, "Everyone on the base knows the group is there (on the base). They're everyday people just like everybody else." But, she said, the existence of the Delta force is never a matter for popular discussion.

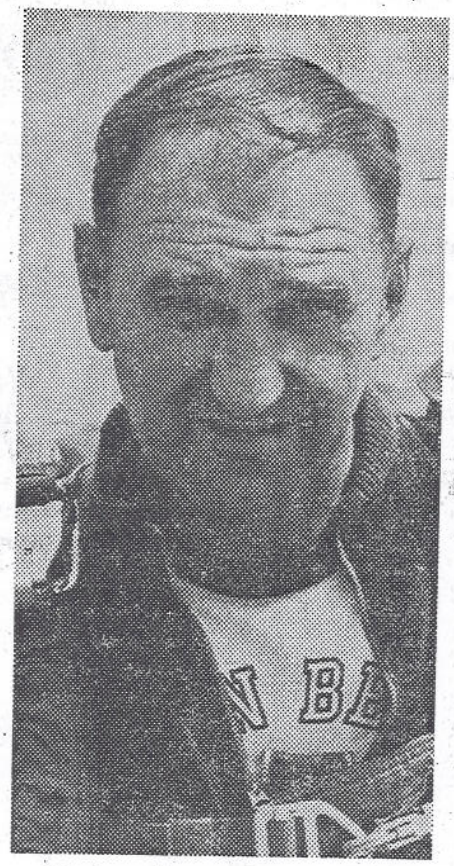
Asked if he knew Col. Beckwith, the legendary founder of the strike force, Meyer replied, "I just as soon not talk about it."

Don't put anyone on the spot by asking about Delta Force and lets not go off snooping for it on th base," said Master Sgt. Arnold Fisher, a Fort Bragg public information officer. "If there is such a unit at Fort Bragg, we



United Press International

Aerial view of former Fort Bragg stockade, where "Blue Light" unit trained.



SGT. MAJ. PETER MORAKAN
. . . "public was our worst enemy"

Col. Charles Beckwith, shown in Vietnam in 1968, heads antiterrorist unit.

can neither confirm nor deny it."

In 1977, President Carter gave the order to organize a counter-terrorist unit—inspired by the successful Israeli commandos who pulled off the Entebbe raid—and Project Blue Light began behind the closed-off, chain-link fences of a converted base stockade. The men—the "cream of the crop," said one Army source—are plucked from all branches of the service.

"Every effort is made to see that the unit doesn't mingle with others," said a Pentagon spokesman. Still, sources say, the commando team's children attend the same school as others on base and their wives shop at the base PX. Some grow their hair longer than the regulation military cut to blend in with the civilian population should they be suddenly whisked off on a top secret mission.
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Highly trained in the subtleties of killing, the men are said to favor long-barreled .22-caliber pistols equipped with silencers—a weapon frequently used by underworld hit men.

In Fayetteville, the town next to Fort Bragg, life goes on as usual. With no definite outlook for the Army's morale problems.

By day, soldiers cruise growling Camaros and whining Kawasaki motorcycles up and down the neon strip of Bragg Boulevard, past the Midway Drive-In ("Dawn of the Dead" playing), Purdie's Furniture Store and assorted mobile home dealers.

By night, they jam the sleazy honky-tonk stretch of strip joints and fast-food take outs along Hay Street. Faded beauties stroll about, courting the men and their money.

"I haven't heard anything about it (the failed rescue mission), at all," said a white jump-suited woman, who called herself "Pigtails." "I was sleeping all day. I didn't listen to the news."

Sgt. Butch Donway, 32, an Army maintenance specialist, hunkered low in the afternoon darkness inside the Dragon Club on base, sipping a Canadian Club. "Stand by Your Man," wailed Tammy Wynette, from the juke box.

"I didn't spend three years in Vietnam just to get wet behind the ears," said Conway. "Once you see a couple of your buddies blown away for nothing the killing starts getting easy.

"If they want to go back in (to Iran), just give me 10 minutes to get my duffle bag packed," he said.

Conway put down his drink long enough to eye a bevy of women sashaying through the shadows, and amended himself. "On second thought, let me get drunk tonight and I'll go tomorrow."