

'Friendlies' in Iran Aided Rescue Try

By George C. Wilson
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Secret cooperation from inside Iran was a major reason American military planners felt they could snatch U.S. hostages out of the embassy compound in Tehran with little or no bloodshed, government officials said yesterday.

The "friendlies," as sources called them to protect identities, worked at two places in Iran to help the American rescue team from the elite Blue Light unit.

The first spot was a mountain hideaway about 100 miles outside Tehran. If it had not been for too many helicopters breaking down during the first stage of the rescue operation last Thursday, the 90 troopers would have flown there in six helicopters. They would have stayed hidden in their mountain lair during the daylight hours of last Friday.

While the American rescue party was preparing to go to the mountain hideaway, the "friendlies" were rounding up innocent looking trucks and buses to put near the base for the troopers' use. This presumably took some doing and involved high risk, although sources did not go into the specifics.

The rescue plan called for the troopers to ride in these trucks and buses from the mountain hideaway into Tehran during the second night of the operation.

After assessing nighttime traffic, sources said, planners concluded that the civilian vehicles would blend into it without arousing suspicions. The troopers in the vehicles would have been concealed in some way.

The second assist in Iran came from a smaller group, officials said, which worked inside Tehran. Although sources would not confirm this, it is probable that the group included a couple of men—perhaps Americans—who could operate radio gear for communicating with the rescue party's helicopters.

Besides that direct help, sources said, the planners of the rescue mission received what they considered reliable information on what they would find when they reached the Embassy compound in Tehran where 50 hostages were being held.

Although sources would not go into

it, it can be speculated that the troopers would know from this data when and where to enter the compound, where the militants' guards would be at that moment and the best way to subdue them without a firefight, relying mainly on surprise rather than on the chemical agents they carried.

Once the rescue team had rounded up the 50 embassy hostages and three others at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, sources said, the helicopters based at the mountain hideaway were to swoop down into the spacious compound, load up the rescuers and rescued and take them to another secret base well outside the city. C130 transport planes standing by there then were to fly everyone out of Iran, leaving the rescue helicopters behind.

A high military official indicated at a Pentagon briefing on Saturday that five helicopters would have been enough for this aerial rescue. He indicated this by saying that the plan called for flying six helicopters to the mountain base in the belief that one of them might not start after spending the day there, leaving five choppers functioning.

With five RH53 Sikorsky "Sea Stallion" helicopters being able to seat 35 people comfortably, 175 in all, the Joint Chiefs of Staff obviously were not leaving a lot of room for carrying any wounded on stretchers out of the compound. The 90-man rescue team, 53 hostages — and perhaps some of

the "friendlies" as yet unidentified — would have taken up most of the room on five helicopters.

With the cancellation of the rescue mission, the groups that worked for its success by direct action and supplying information have been dispersed. It is doubtful that such a network could be put together again anytime soon for another attempt at rescuing the hostages in Tehran.

Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) has speculated publicly that some part of the Iranian government might have been cooperating in the rescue effort, but there has been no confirmation of this by the U.S. government.

However, U.S. officials have said that they expected little bloodshed if the troopers did get inside the embassy. This came through in the following exchange at a Pentagon news conference on Friday with Defense Secretary Harold Brown:

Q. How could you have secured the release of the hostages without massive bloodshed, given the fact that there is an estimated 150 armed Iranian militants guarding the embassy?

A. I am not going to go into the details of any parts of the mission, beyond the part that were actually carried out. I will say that the Joint Chiefs of Staff thoroughly reviewed this; I reviewed it, and the team itself was convinced that that was the part of the mission of which they were most confident.