OPS UP DATE

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STRATEGIC AIR RESCUE

On October 27, 1978, in response to blaring klaxons a reconnaissance crew ran to their awaiting RC-135. In less than twelve minutes another successful alert launch had been made from Shemya AFB, Alaska. As the aircraft climbed above Attu Island at the tip of the Aleutians, the crew completed checklist procedures they had followed a hundred times before. As the aircraft approached level off, reports were passed, equipment and instruments were checked, and the crew settled into the comfortable routine of flying another operational sortie.

Shortly after level off a message was received that changed the familiar routine into a hectic, risky, and extremely demanding adventure. The RC-135, nicknamed COBRA BALL, was diverted from its normal mission and directed to proceed to the last known position of a Navy P-3 Orion that had ditched in the North Pacific approximately 260 miles southwest of Shemya.

The COBRA BALL is a high altitude reconnaissance platform used for collecting short-lived intelligence data used in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks. No one on board the aircraft had experience flying Search and Rescue Missions. There was no planning or briefing on what was to occur; however, the climax of that day's events might have been dreamt up in a Hollywood studio.

The first problem the crew encountered was to plan a successful and timely route to the ditching site. Careful planning of the route was extremely important to prevent accidental overflight of the Soviet-owned Komondorski Islands which lay between COBRA BALL and the ditching site. After successful navigation around Soviet airspace, the COBRA BALL was turned directly toward the ditching site.

The Aircraft Commander planned a descent to arrive over the site at an altitude of 1,000 feet. Since jet aircraft fuel consumption is higher at low altitudes, the less time spent at low altitude enroute to the site meant more time available for searching. Throughout the descent, altimeters were constantly cross-checked by both pilots and navigators as well as the Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO) crew members using the radar altimeter. Every man on board contributed to the effort as the aircraft descended toward the icy waters of the North Pacific. The same thought ran through each man's mind. Would they find the downed P-3 crew and would anyone survive the arctic waters in which they had crashed?

Survival in the arctic environment is filled with problems that anyone who flies from Shemya must be prepared to face. It's not only the year around 35°-38° water temperature but also the high winds which brings low chill factors and high seas. Low clouds are often present and whether in the form of snow, rain, hail, or freezing rain, the weather is always bad. These are the conditions that make the Aleutian Islands one of the most formidable flying environments in the world. During this October afternoon in the ditching area there was rain, fog, westerly winds of forty knots and waves running from 15 to 20 feet high.

As the COBRA BALL descended toward the crash coordinates everyone was relieved when the aircraft broke out of heavy clouds at 1,100 feet above sea level. The EWOs reported that the emergency locator beacon was becoming stronger. Everyone not needed to operate equipment manned a window. The aircraft began a right circular search pattern expanding outward from the crash site coordinates. Due to an inoperative autopilot and an inoperative right hydraulic system (with subsequent loss of the aircraft power rudder system), the aircraft commander chose to fly at a higher than normal maneuvering speed, with the flaps retracted. The slim chances of finding an aircraft or life raft on the gigantic stretches of ocean loomed in everyone's mind. As the minutes ticked off, the only encouraging sign was the continuing emergency beacon signal.

A Navy P-3 enroute to the site established radio contact and informed COBRA BALL that their ETA would be in 30 minutes and that the downed P-3 did not carry voice transmitting equipment in its survival kits. The visibility in the area was less than three miles and appeared to be getting worse. COBRA BALL continued its circular search. All eyes were straining through the mist. The prospects of finding survivors were getting bleaker and the crew's spirits began to sink. It was then that the copilot sighted a flare.

The sight of the flare from the raft was met with cheers throughout the COBRA BALL. Location of the survivors was passed around the world. The COBRA BALL is equipped with the Air Force Satellite Communication System (AFSATCOM) and agencies all the way up to JCS were informed "we've found them." AFSATCOM proved to be an invaluable communications tool and played a major part in the SAR effort. After that first flare was sighted a figure eight was flown around the site coordinates. The rafts were sighted on five passes, but poor visibility made it impossible to determine the number of survivors.

The crew directed the Navy P-3 to the survivors' coordinates. Once the P-3 established visual contact with the survivors, COBRA BALL climbed to altitude to conserve fuel and act as the on-scene coordinator. During the two hours after the P-3's arrival, COBRA BALL used its sophisticated communications equipment to keep the low level P-3 informed of other rescue efforts and of the pending arrival of a Coast Guard HC-130 from Kodiak. The Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) informed COBRA BALL of the location of a ship some 40 to 50 miles from the survivors. The crew was unable to make radio contact with the ship. RCC then asked COBRA BALL to go low level and fly across the bow of the ship. However, the fuel situation was becoming critical, and a refueling with a KC-135 tanker from Eielson AFB, would come first. The refueling would be complex since there were no published air refueling tracks, no TACAN and no radar targets available in the area. Still, the two SAC aircraft completed a successful rendezvous and refueling using a track of their own design. After refueling, the tanker returned to Eielson and the BALL returned to the survivors' location. It was now dark and the Coast Guard HC-130 was on scene. The HC-130 kept track of the survivors while the P-3 began searching for the surface vessel. The 15 men who had been aboard the downed P-3 had now been in the water for eight hours and, without contact, their number and physical condition was unknown. After several halting radio transmissions between the P-3 and the ship, the vessel altered its course in the direction of the ditching site. The reason for the difficulty in contact was soon evident. The vessel was a Russian fishing ship, the MVS Senyavina. High level communications had been going on between the US and the Soviet Union, and the Russian ship was awaiting instructions. As the Russians began moving toward the site, the three aircraft and the world awaited news of what the Russians would find.

The rest of the story was in the newspaper and on television the next day. Ten of the fifteen crew members survived. The Aircraft Commander was lost with the aircraft, another man was killed in the crash and three men died from exposure.

All of the SAC crew members involved in the SAR effort felt a profound sense of accomplishment. They also felt something else. They had a new sense of pride in themselves and confidence in their professional abilities. When the extra effort was needed, each man found himself tirelessly performing beyond his limits and without complaint. When a need arose on board the aircraft, someone stepped forward with initiative, skill, and imagination. Each performance flowed into one coordinated effort that resulted in the saving of ten lives.

RC-135 CREW MEMBERS:
Aircraft Commander — Capt Clifford B. Carter; Navigator #1 — Capt Bruce J. Savaglio; Electronic Warfare Officer Crew Commander — Capt Alan C. Feldkamp.

On the evening of 2 Apr 1979 a reception and dinner was held at Eielson AFB, AK. The guests of honor were the survivors of the Navy P-3 ditching. They were presented a briefing on COBRA BALL and introduced to the COBRA BALL aircrew responsible for their location and rescue from the cold, wind blown seas of the North Pacific. After the evening's formalities were concluded the aircrews relaxed in a casual atmosphere to exchange memories of that harrowing ordeal of 27 Oct 78.