

## Daring Rescues Snatch Pilots from Jaws of Enemy

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FORT BELVOIR, Va., Feb. 17, 2000 -- The night of May 2, 1999, was a helluva nightmare for F-16C Fighting Falcon pilot "Hammer 34." He'd bailed out of his crippled jet fighter and was prone in a pitch-black, thickly wooded area trying to conceal his whereabouts from Serbian troops.

"Suddenly, I heard footsteps in the ravine behind me," Hammer 34 told the audience here during DoD's recent third annual personnel recovery conference, sponsored by the Defense POW-Missing Personnel Office. Hammer 34 and his rescuers told their stories on the condition of anonymity.

"Damn!" he recalled exclaiming to himself. "I can't believe these guys have found me here after I've been running for an hour!"

"Hammer 34" had just finished a strike against Serb SAM missile sites near Novi Sad when an enemy missile exploded close to his jet and made his the second U.S. aircraft downed during Operation Allied Force. He punched out and watched the aircraft hit the ground in a ball of flames as he parachuted safely to the ground.

Hammer 34 reached for his 9 mm weapon to protect himself from "the thing" coming toward him, but he'd lost it when he ejected or while running for cover. Listening intently to the weight of the footsteps as they came closer, Hammer 34 speculated that a small animal or child was coming toward him at two o'clock in the morning.

He grabbed a big chunk of mud and threw it at "the thing."

"To the best of my recollection, this 'thing' reared up and was about five feet tall with big red eyes and growled like nothing I'd never heard," Hammer 34 said. "Jesse Owens couldn't have kept up with me.

"I'll swear to my dying day that it was a mountain lion or a jaguar in Serbia," said Hammer 34, who was later plucked out of enemy territory in a daring pre-dawn rescue effort. When he told his fellow fighter pilots about the incident, they roared with laughter and said it had to have been a field mouse.

Hammer 34 and "Vega 31," the F-117 Nighthawk pilot who'd been the first flier shot down over Serbia, said biggest morale booster for pilots downed in enemy territory is knowing that somebody is going to rescue them. They emphasized that survivors -- pilots and crews -- are part of the search and rescue effort, too. They stressed the importance of survivors being well trained and prepared to evade, survive and assist the recovery force in extracting them from enemy territory.

Hammer 34 said he yelled only "Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!" over his radio before he ejected. That let search and rescue personnel know he was in trouble while preventing the Serbs from keying in on his location. Later, he said, he re-established communications and assured the search and rescue team he was in good condition. He told them he was searching for a better place to hole-up and would check back in about an hour.

Meanwhile, search and rescue personnel swung into action. The Combined Personnel Recovery Coordination Center redirected four airborne F-16s to support the recovery operation as the ground team simultaneously transmitted critical details of the situation to the pilots. Rescue helicopter pilots scrambled. The control center relayed a weather report for the area where the pilot was trapped behind enemy lines -- fairly decent with scattered clouds at 10,000 feet and a full moon.

When Hammer 34's F-16 crashed, search and rescue helicopter crews were sitting miles away in Tuzla

playing cards and listening to radio news about the air war.

“We heard over the radio that an aircraft had been downed and the wreckage had been confirmed in Serbia,” the lead helicopter pilot said. Everybody scrambled to two MH-53J Pave Low helicopters and a MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter to rescue the pilot before the Serbs could capture him.

“We knew as we headed for the helicopters that we’d be pressing across the border without delay,” the lead pilot said. Shortly after lift off, someone shot two surface-to-air missiles at the rescue party. “We immediately reacted and the missiles missed the formation by about 200 feet.” Two more missiles also missed their target.

The Serbs were relentless in their efforts to shoot down the helicopters, but the rescuers regrouped and, just as they crossed into Serbia, the Pave Low pilots to the rear saw a missile coming up from behind. The rescuers evaded them, but the Serbs weren’t done.

As the helicopters entered a valley, Serb troops fired more missiles, which passed harmlessly through and beneath the formation.

After about seven minutes of searching for Hammer 34 at the original pick-up position, the pilots received new information. The airborne computers plotted the downed pilot’s new location about 17 miles away.

“As we progressed, we received significant small arms fire,” the lead helicopter pilot said. As his helicopter popped over a ridge, small-arms fire erupted from a two-story building. His gunner fired back and the attack stopped. Shortly afterward, the leader established communications with Hammer 34.

“He was steering us to his location based on the rotor noise,” the leader said. Hammer 34 told the audience he’d done that hoping the rotors he heard were from friendly helicopters.

The Pave Lows passed by him. When the Pave Hawk pilot saw Hammer 34’s strobe light, he made an immediate turn to that location. The Pave Lows provided air cover as the Pave Hawk put down in a clearing. Two Air Force special tactics pararescuemen and a combat controller jumped out the aircraft.

Hammer 34 scampered into the open from a treeline and the armed combat controller ran past him to cover his back. One pararescueman covered the team with his weapon as the second prepared Hammer 34 for extraction. Gunfire erupted as the four men boarded the Pave Hawk.

“As I got on board, I laid on top of Hammer 34 in hopes to shield him from small arms fire, because I didn’t know where it was coming from,” the ground team leader recalled.

As the Pave Hawk zoomed for friendly territory, the two armored Pave Lows maneuvered into a sandwich formation to protect it. The rising sun greeted the three helicopters, and so did Serb heavy anti-aircraft artillery and small-arms fire, the speakers noted. They evaded the intense ground fire and, looking back as they safely crossed the border, saw Serb spotlights still searching the sky for them.

Stealth fighter pilot Vega 31 said he was flown to Aviano Air Base, Italy, after his rescue and the expressions on the faces of greeters are indelibly implanted in his memory. The sun hadn’t been up long when he landed, he said, and everybody had been up all night looking for him.

“They all shared a similar face: Faces combined with shock and deep concern, faces of uncertainty and disbelief, yet faces of discernible relief,” he said.

Each search and rescue is unique in considerations, dynamics and circumstances, Vega 31 noted, but they also all share certain qualities. “It’s about patriotism, pride, gratitude, inspiration,” he said. “The superb search and rescue effort is about the day-after-day, intense devotion to duty and dedication to duty of our

military. They are inspiring stories that a very grateful country can be proud of.”

Vega 31 said his rescue wasn't flawless. Some of the equipment and capabilities didn't work or weren't available. But, he said, the operation was still successful and for that he credited training, preparation, trust, faith, confidence and teamwork.

“It was also successful because of fierce determination and drive and unfaltering discipline and extraordinary situation awareness,” Vega 31 said.

DoD's annual conference heightens awareness of personnel recovery at the highest levels of the U.S. government, said Army Col. Mel Richmond, director of the Defense POW-Missing Personnel Office's operations directorate. Attendees exchange ideas and identify and resolve issues pertaining to DoD personnel recovery policies, he said.