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Rescued pilot details evasion, inspiration

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by 1st Lt. Matthew Borg
31st Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

AVIANO AIR BASE, Italy (AFPN) -- During his more than six hours behind enemy lines, the U.S. F-117 pilot who ejected during a night mission over Yugoslavia March 27, waited for his rescuers with a cloth American flag under his flight suit and against his body.

Given to him by an airman as he strapped in for his mission, he secured the flag before he took off, and that's where it remained until his return, providing him a calming reassurance throughout.

"A moment like this is a prayer in object form," said the pilot, whose identity is being protected for operational security reasons. "Her giving that flag to me was saying, 'I'm giving this to you to give back to me when you get home.'"

"For me it was representative of all the people who I knew were praying," said the pilot. "It was a piece of everyone and very comforting. It helped me not let go of hope. Hope gives you strength ... it gives you endurance."

In numerous debriefings over the past week, the pilot spoke of this endurance along with his determination to survive and evade, but credits his return home to the search and rescue team that plucked him from deep within Serbian territory.

Punctuated by repeated statements of gratitude to his rescuers, the stealth fighter pilot detailed his emergency ejection, enemy evasion and eventual rescue.

"I knew I was fairly deep into Serbian territory," said the Air Force pilot. "I had guessed my position was within 20 miles of Belgrade -- not a happy thought, considering the risk involved in a combat search and rescue that deep into Serbian territory."

The pilot said he purposely wasn't optimistic about a timely extraction, and was prepared for potential capture.

"I knew everybody was doing everything they could, but I also knew what was involved in trying to recover me," said the pilot. "Even though that team is highly trained and extremely skilled, I knew the risks and complexity, as well as the danger. I still can't believe that I got on board that (rescue vehicle) with our guys."

The cause of the crash is still under investigation, but the pilot did provide officials with a detailed account of his ejection from the aircraft.

While he doesn't know exactly what the negative G-forces were prior to his ejection, he described them as "enormous," potentially as high as five times the force of gravity.

"I remember having to fight to get my hands to go down toward the (ejection seat) handgrips," he explained. "I always strap in very tightly, but because of the intense G-forces, I was hanging in the straps and had to stretch to reach the handles."

While he recalls the intense strain involved in getting his fingertips to the ejection handles, he said he doesn't remember making the conscious decision to eject from the aircraft.

"Am I going to know when it's time to get out?' is the question on every fighter pilot's mind," he said. "The one fragment of this whole event I can't remember is pulling the handles. God took my hands and pulled."

Uninjured except for a few minor abrasions, the Nighthawk pilot described the ejection as "violent." Although slightly disoriented after the high-air-speed ejection, he was very aware he had just bailed out deep within Serbian territory.

"It didn't panic me," he said. "I just got very busy doing what I needed to do."

After his parachute had deployed, he said he immediately started working the rescue.

"I remember thinking, 'Why wait until I hit the ground? Let's go for it now,'" he explained.

The pilot attributes a great deal of his success behind enemy lines to his Air Force SERE training, an intensive program that includes survival, evasion, resistance and escape instruction.

"There was not a whole lot of this that I actually had to ponder," he said. "The SERE training and periodic life support refresher training provide a very strong foundation of survival techniques. Having experienced (survival and evasion) at some level, even though it was in the training environment, provided some level of familiarity."

Because of the potential that the Serbs were also monitoring various radio frequencies, the pilot had to minimize his radio transmissions and calls for help.

After making radio contact with NATO forces, he used the remaining minutes of his descent to survey the land -- looking for landmarks, areas of cover and a landing site.

Parachuting into a freshly plowed field approximately 50 yards from a road and rail track intersection, he immediately began burying the life raft and other survival equipment automatically deployed during the ejection sequence.

"There was some activity at that intersection," he said. "Thank God no one actually saw me come down." While he couldn't absolutely confirm that the cars, trucks and people he heard were looking for him, he did hear search dogs. At one point, a dog came within 30 feet of where he was huddled.

The pilot spent the next six hours hunkered down in this "hold-up site" in a shallow culvert 200 yards away from his landing site. It was during this time that many questions began racing through his head.

"A very important part of the whole combat search and rescue operation is to minimize transmission on the radio," he said. "However, for the downed guy, it's very unsettling to not know what's going on. You're thinking, 'Do they know I'm here? Do they know my location? Where are the assets and who is involved? What's the plan? Are they going to try to do this tonight?' It's the unknowns that are unsettling."

But amid this road race of thoughts, the Air Force officer had something tangible to get him through six hours of solitude amidst barking search dogs, passing headlights and pursuit trucks roaring up and down the nearby road -- the American flag.

And while the downed pilot waited, so did the American people, including those forces deployed to Aviano Air Base, Italy.

"When we heard he was down," said the airman who had given him the flag, "it was as if we had lost a member of our family. These guys aren't just pilots to us. We know their families and they know ours."

The pilot endured for more than a quarter of a day until the special operations unit arrived. With minimal communication but careful and discreet authentication of his identity, the search and rescue team was able to ingress to the pilot's hold-up location. Search and rescue specialists with emergency medical capabilities and whose mission is to recover combat air crews in austere environments quickly extracted the pilot and whisked him toward friendly ground.

Among the first to greet the rescued pilot at Aviano was the airman. Amid the hugs, back slapping and hand shaking, the F-117 pilot spotted her in the crowd and reached into his flight suit to reveal the flag he had promised to return to her.

"People have asked me if I was thinking about the flag I had given him," the airman said. "I wasn't thinking about it at all. I just wanted him back."

Now, just days after his rescue, the downed pilot is anxious to get right back in the cockpit.

"The leadership said they wanted to give me a breather and that it wasn't my choice," said the pilot. "All I asked was that I be able to stay here for as long as possible before heading back. I think all of us need to have time together to visit with our emotions."

Allied Force air operations continue to launch here day and night, with approximately 140 warplanes operating out of the Northeastern Italy air base. Nearly 400 NATO aircraft in the region have been ordered by Gen. Wesley Clark, supreme allied commander Europe, to focus more intensely on Yugoslav forces.

While the rescued pilot will be miles away from the combat for the foreseeable future, he did want the American public to know how hard those still supporting the operations are working.

"(The American people) can be very proud of the devotion and hustle everyone is exhibiting over here," said the pilot. "Keep them in your prayers and support them." (Courtesy of U.S. Air Forces in Europe News Service)

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