

Air Education and Training Command's

TORCH

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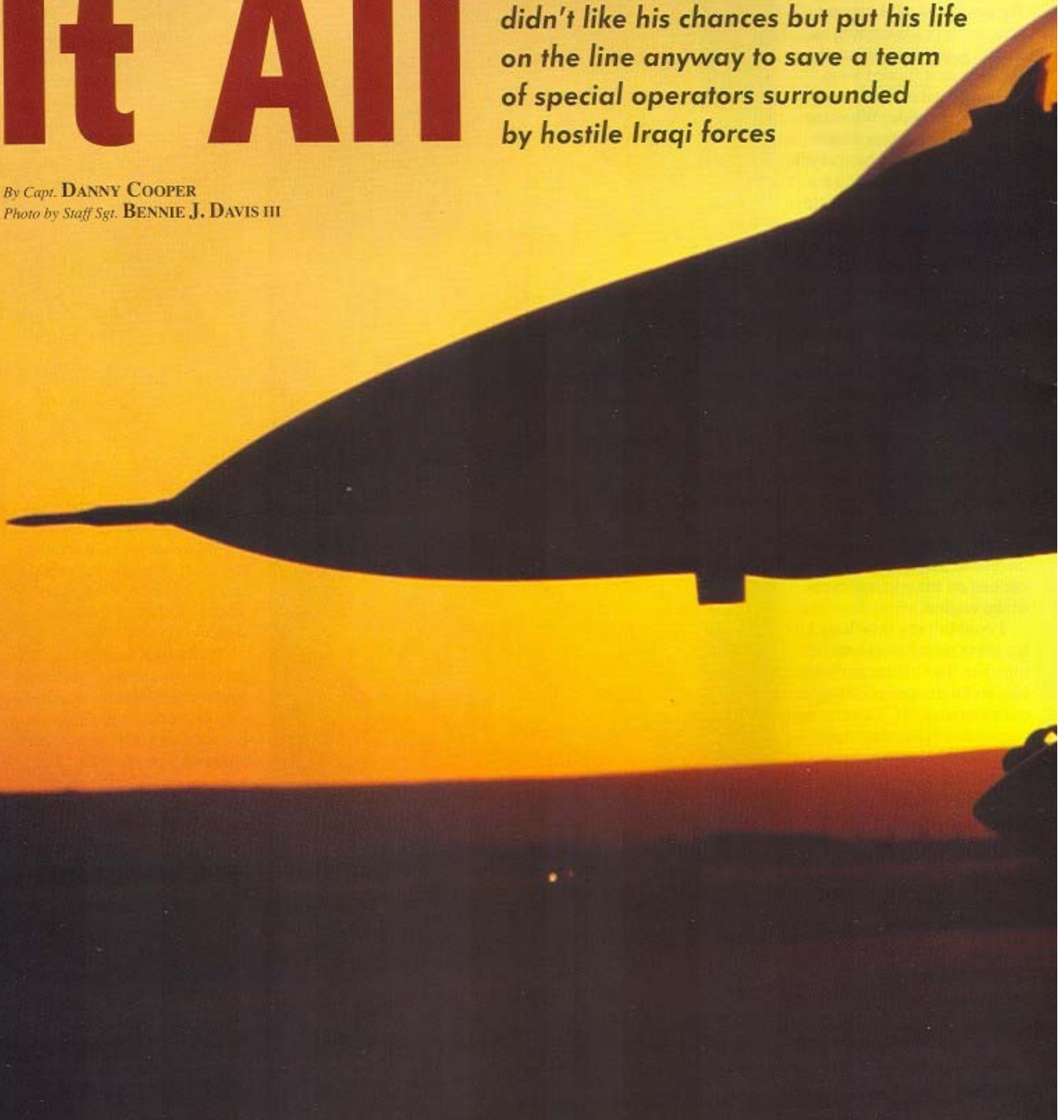
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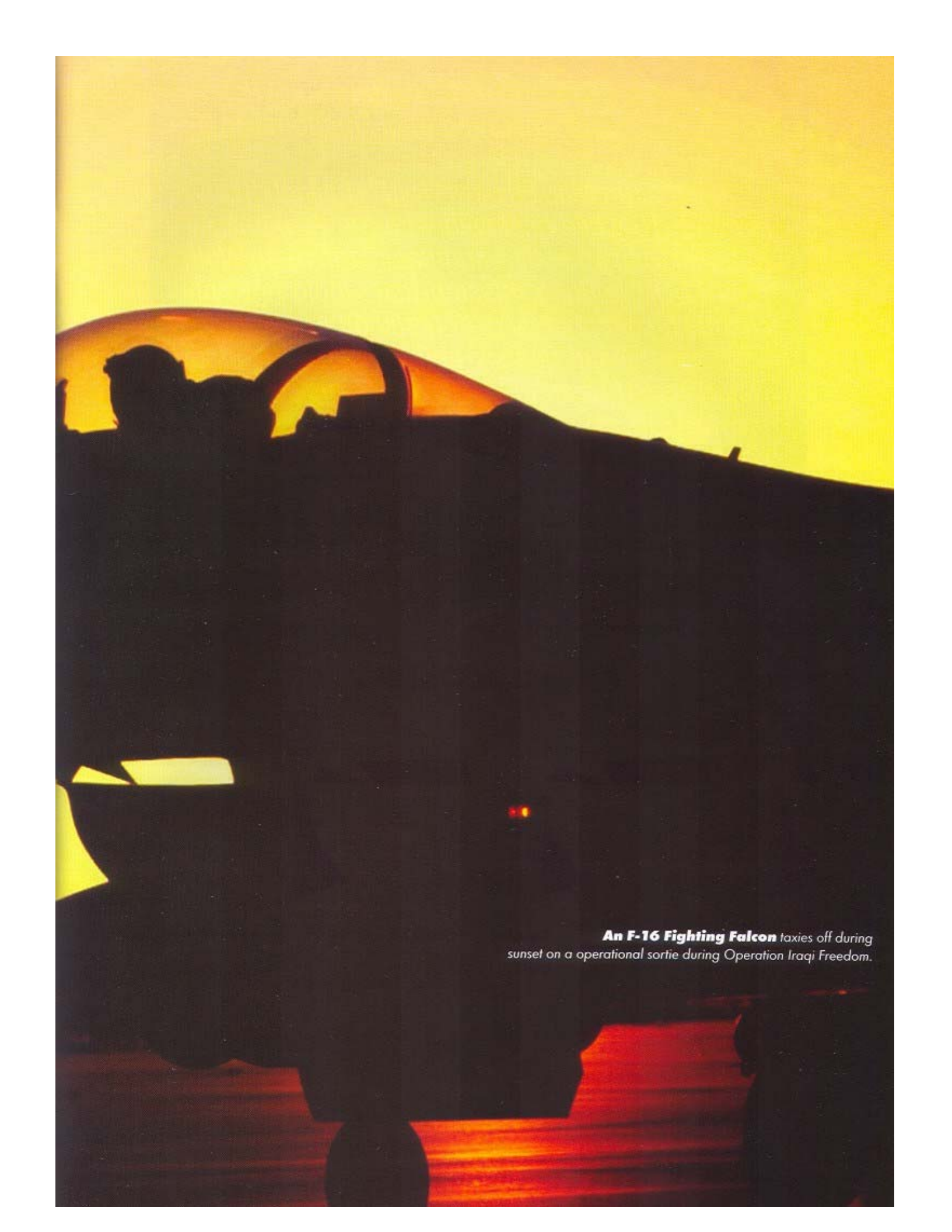
RISKING

It All

An F-16 pilot assessed the risk, didn't like his chances but put his life on the line anyway to save a team of special operators surrounded by hostile Iraqi forces

*By Capt. DANNY COOPER
Photo by Staff Sgt. BENNIE J. DAVIS III*



A dramatic photograph of an F-16 Fighting Falcon taxiing on a runway at sunset. The aircraft is shown in silhouette against a bright, golden-yellow sky. The cockpit canopy is prominent, and the runway surface is illuminated with a warm, reddish-orange glow from the setting sun. A small red light is visible on the fuselage.

An F-16 Fighting Falcon taxis off during sunset on a operational sortie during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

MISSION: SCUD missile hunting in Western Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. **DATE:** March 30, 2003.

On that night Maj. Edward "Ned" H. Linch III, flying an F-16 while deployed with the Alabama Air National Guard, led his wingman, Capt. Brian Wolf, on a SCUD hunting mission that would not only change his life, but lives of many others as well.

Toward the end of a six-hour mission, the flight was diverted to an area 400 miles inside enemy territory to assist troops possibly needing air cover. En-route Linch began hearing frantic radio calls on the "guard" radio frequency reserved for emergencies.

"One guy was going hysterical," the major said. "These were the most desperate and urgent radio calls I've ever heard. The calls were difficult to understand at times since they were in such dire straits under fire."

On the ground, a numerically superior Iraqi force, estimated at 20 to one, was surrounding a group of Coalition special operations forces. The Iraqis were only about 300 meters from the friendly forces and closing.

According to Linch, the frantic voice of one of the special operators created a "calling" to press the limits.

"We disregarded concern for ourselves and pressed beyond the limits of our jets ... and our personal limitations," he said.

Since this battle was well outside of their planned SCUD hunting area, Linch and Wolf had little awareness of the environment below them. The flight had no information on the terrain, the lines of communication or threats in the area.

Additionally, the pilots were wearing night-vision goggles, or NVGs, but barely had sufficient illumination for them to work because of the remnants of a massive sandstorm in the area the day before.

Despite the extreme risk to himself and his flight, Linch descended through the hazardous conditions to provide immediate air support for the trapped team.

"We had to act now or these guys were going to die," Linch said. "I knew we were their only hope at the time to survive. I was going to try to help

them regardless of the conditions or the safety of my flight."

With only an infrared strobe from the ground troops, kept intermittent at best because of the weather, for situational awareness, Linch orchestrated several reconnaissance passes and bomb runs over the position to aid the endangered Coalition troops.

Although not properly equipped for this type of mission, Linch was able to direct Wolf to drop one 500-pound bomb.

But, the enemy force didn't quit.

Fearing the potential for friendly casualties, Linch and Wolf abandoned attempts to drop any more bombs. Instead they continued to make passes through the weather and blacked-out conditions to distract, harass and hopefully deter the enemy force.

"It's one of the worst weather situations I've ever flown in," said Linch, who has 16 years and more than 3,000 hours of fighter experience. "With poor visibility [from] the dust and haze, it was difficult to differentiate the ground from the clouds — you're basically flying around in a 'milk bowl.' The NVG picture looks like snow on a TV; it's just all shades of green.

"With no moon and stars to provide illumination for my

NVGs and no horizon to reference, it was almost impossible to visually fly the aircraft without referencing the instruments, but I had many of my cockpit lights turned off and a few set to a very dim setting to assist me in finding their IR strobe. I had

"One guy was going hysterical. These were the most desperate and urgent radio calls I've ever heard. The calls were difficult to understand at times since [the special ops troops] were in such dire straits under [enemy] fire. ... We had to act now, or these guys were going to die."

to rely on my wingman to call out critical information such as my altitude.”

At one point, both pilots dispensed flares, again hoping to distract the enemy. Using the flares is a dangerous proposition because the flares not only highlight their position, but also wash out what little vision they had through their goggles in the process.

“We were flying around in conditions unsuitable for this, and we both kept getting spatially disoriented,” Linch said of the dangerous condition pilots experience when they don’t have sufficient references to maintain proper control of the airplane.

The fight went on for almost half an hour with both pilots repeatedly foregoing personal safety by descending below specified altitudes despite almost zero visibility.

Eventually, the Coalition forces were able to break through the line of enemy troops and proceed to a safer position.

“The combination of the bomb, the flares and the noise allowed the troops to get on the run and escape the situation,” Linch said.

The following day, Linch and Wolf learned the entire group of friendly forces was rescued, and all were alive after a major combat rescue effort.

On July 13, 2003, after returning from his tour, Alabama Governor Bob Riley presented Linch with the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism.

“I give a lot of credit to my wingman, Captain Wolf, for his efforts that night, and to God for protecting everyone in a situation that could have claimed many lives,” Linch said. ¶

Captain Cooper is with the 505th Command and Control Wing Public Affairs Office at Hurlburt Field, Fla. (ACCNS)

NOTE: Linch is now a lieutenant colonel and chief of plans with the 505th Command and Control Wing at Hurlburt Field, Fla. He received the Air Force Aviator’s Valor Award May 8 at Fort Hamilton, N.Y., for his actions during the Operation Iraqi Freedom mission. The Valor Award is presented annually by the American Legion Aviator’s Post 743 to recognize a military aviator from each service that has performed a “conspicuous act of valor or courage during aerial flight” in the preceding year as approved by their service’s chief of staff. Previous Air Force winners include Gen. Henry “Hap” Arnold and then-Maj. Chuck Yeager. Linch also will receive the Lockheed Semper Viper Award in July.

Transcript from Lt. Col. Ned Linch:

“We had to taxi using night vision goggles in our undisclosed desert location. Foreign object damage was a big issue, and the lighting on the taxiways was marginal. From the time you taxied to shut down, you had to stay focused. Staying focused was our biggest asset in regard to risk management. Taking off with a full loadout, the runway had so many dips in it, you felt like you were riding on a horse. On many missions, we brought back our bombs. Landing with 3,000 pounds of bombs in an F-16 on a short runway was sporty sometimes, to say the least. We never had a pilot have hot brakes or take the cable.

We also had zero mishaps. I attribute that success to the high experience rate of most Air National Guard squadrons and the ability of pilots to manage their risk, because the entire operation was risky. We could have lost several jets and pilots if we had not managed our risk. Hats off to the crew chiefs and other maintenance folks.”



Anatomy of a Manic Mission

On a combat mission in Iraq where he seemingly had to “break all the rules,” Lt. Col. Edward H. Lynch III still stressed the importance of risk management. He elaborates in this question and answer session with Torch.

Q. What goes through your mind on a heroic mission like this where you're forced to ignore many of the safeguards set in place to protect you and your jet?

A. First off, I don't see myself as some great pilot or hero as some news articles can imply. We did the best we could that night despite the situation. I'm a perfectionist, and even today, I replay this mission in my mind trying to convince myself that we did everything possible to help. I'm very critical on myself.

Capt. Brian Wolf and I were the first jets on station to help during the critical moments when the troops were surrounded. Our jet noise, the attacks [including the aborted attacks], and the flares made a difference to help them break out of the overrun situation.

I sincerely thought these guys [the special operations troops] were not going to make it. It really bummed me out. It was a long flight returning home that night wondering if they were going to make it.

I wrote my wife an e-mail that night telling her that I tried to help some troops, but “I think they are dead or captured now.” It was the next day before I found out they had been rescued by helicopter. That was a great relief.

I found out later that there were several [friendly] teams on the ground in the same general area. I'm assuming the team we helped somehow got separated from the rest. The bottom line is that flight discipline saved lives. If we had been cowboys plinking bombs everywhere into the unknown [based on their communications], we might have hit some of the other teams.

I still thank God and my wingman,



Lt. Col. Edward H. Lynch III

Captain Wolf, for his excellent support on my wing. Brian stayed on my wing while maneuvering in unsuitable conditions under fire, calling out “check altitude” at critical moments having the situational awareness to maneuver into a position for a bombing attack.

Q. How did you deal with switching from a SCUD

hunting mission to a close air support mission?

A. We were not equipped to fly an F-16 visually in such weather/conditions at night with no night vision goggle illumination — no F-16 is. We routinely switched between hunting for SCUDS and then assisting the special forces in a CAS mission. But, this night was different. The key ingredients that night were communications and the weather ... and the urgent, hysterical radio calls.

Hysterical radio calls for help by ground troops can cause you to react using emotions versus tactics. There is no way to train for this. Until you've heard someone calling frantically for help on the radio in combat, you can't relate. Most fighter pilots will risk their lives to help.

I attempted to keep my emotions in a different compartment and focus on the task to be done — just flying in these unsuitable conditions took most of my brainpower. This is something you will never be able to train for — balancing emotions with execution. But, the emotions of the comm created the need to press to the limit.

One of his transmissions on the radio: “Fast air! Fast air!!! We need your help!” (heavy breathing with a frantic voice). “[Destroy] everything around us within 300

meters! We are completely surrounded, and they have all lights out!”

On a side note in regard to emotions versus execution, I was the wingman on a mishap on Sept. 11, 2002, when my flight lead lost his engine. As I watched my friend eject and get one swing before the trees, I had to keep my emotions intact to help with the rescue effort. For about three minutes, I thought he did not make it — that was tough. Regardless, you have to put your emotions in a different compartment, and after landing, let it out.

Q. Having little awareness of the environment below with no information on the terrain, lines of communication or the threat in the area, what precautions did you take?

A. I attempted to stay above 10,000 feet much as possible mainly for threats as we searched the area attempting to gain contact with the friendly troops via their infrared strobe. I knew this would keep us clear. For the attacks, I had no idea in regard to the terrain or threats. That was a risk I was willing to accept. We did not have time to research; we had to act.

I just had to assume the target area was similar to our normal operating area for the terrain elevation as well as the threats. But, I was not sure, and that is not a comfortable situation for a fighter pilot in peacetime or combat.

In a note from my journal about that night, I wrote: “I felt like we had to act now or these guys were going to die! I really felt in my heart of hearts (based on the hysterical radio calls), Wolfman and I were their only hope at the time, and visually maneuvering in these weather conditions with night vision goggles was going to be



a challenge that might create a mishap.”

Just the thought of a mishap makes you act with caution. I pressed further than I’ve ever pressed in regard to the weather, visibility and the unknowns. We were not cowboys but flew the best jet we could for the circumstances.

I dimmed my HUD (heads up display) to try and find their infrared strobe. I could just make out the aiming symbology and the horizon line but not the altitude or airspeed. I had the cockpit lights dimmed as well, and the only instrument I could see was the barely lit attitude indicator.

I kept getting spatial disorientation and had to constantly look inside the cockpit and strain to see the attitude indicator to stay spatially orientated. I relied on my wingman to provide cover for me in regard to altitude when I was pointing at the ground.

Initially, I attempted to offset their position [the friendly position] and roll in for a dive bomb attack – similar to a day CAS mission from a “wheel.” But, because of the visibility and no horizon for a reference [kept getting spatial disorientation], I changed my course of action and flew a 10-mile racetrack pattern at 10,000 feet.

For my attacks and recon passes, I’d bunt over to 10 to 15 degrees and drive at the approximate position of the friendly troops. This was more controlled, was similar to what I learned in the Block 40 F-16 for medium altitude attacks using the Block 40 FLIR, and gave my wingman the opportunity to give me cover/visual lookout for threats and monitor the attack. I aborted my attacks since I did not locate the strobe prior to my wingman calling “check altitude.”

On one attack, he located the strobe as I was aborting and climbing. I passed him the tactical lead, and he maneuvered into position for one attack offsetting from the infrared strobe.

Q. *What played in your decision to drop the 500-pound bomb in close air support, as well as the decision thereafter to drop no more?*

A. Flight discipline. We used a lot of discipline that night. With the frantic radio calls, it almost made you want to start plinking bombs throughout the area to create confusion and havoc for the enemy – maybe strafe too. But, our training and rule of engagement don’t allow such and we stuck with the rules [some rules more assumed than actually spelled out].

But, with their dire situation, it pushed us to the limit – a limit that if exceeded could have caused fratricide. Until you’ve experienced the situation, you will never know the feeling. Dropping bombs was very risky, but based on the hysterical comm, they made us feel like if we did not provide some type of immediate help, they were going to die.

Q. *How did you deal with the poor visibility from the remnants of the sandstorm [spatial disorientation]?*

A. I used the HUD and my round dial attitude indicator between my legs. I’d look outside, maneuver, and then look back in at my instruments to verify. I’ve read too many night vision goggle mishap reports.

In one of my briefings I gave as a safety officer, I briefed a term I made up called the FART check for NVGs. It sounded funny, and I thought folks might listen and

remember. During my NVG training, I made this my habit pattern: F – formation position/fuel; A – attitude; R – radar; T – tactical air display.

That night over Iraq, my scan was “look for the troops’ IR strobe,” then attitude, then “look for the troops’ IR strobe,” then recover from an unusual attitude, then back to searching. Every time I’d find their strobe, I’d look in to regain my spatial orientation, and then I’d lose the critical visual contact.

Q. *What was the impact on situational awareness with only an infrared strobe from the ground troops to gain your bearings?*

A. Very difficult. Something I’d never trained for. I never thought I’d be getting a call telling me they were surrounded and the enemy was 300 meters away. How far is 300 meters if attempting to offset a bomb from a friendly strobe?

My game plan was to find the IR strobe and then attack by offsetting left or right of the friendly position and try to disrupt/distract the overrun of friendly troops. Three hundred meters was going to be a guess. But, I was not going to get too close to the strobe, and I was going to only use a 500-pound bomb versus the 2,000-pound bomb I had available.


Again, the frantic radio comm forced us to do something now, but not act stupid. Always in the back of your mind is the mishap investigation of the troops bombed by accident in Afghanistan.

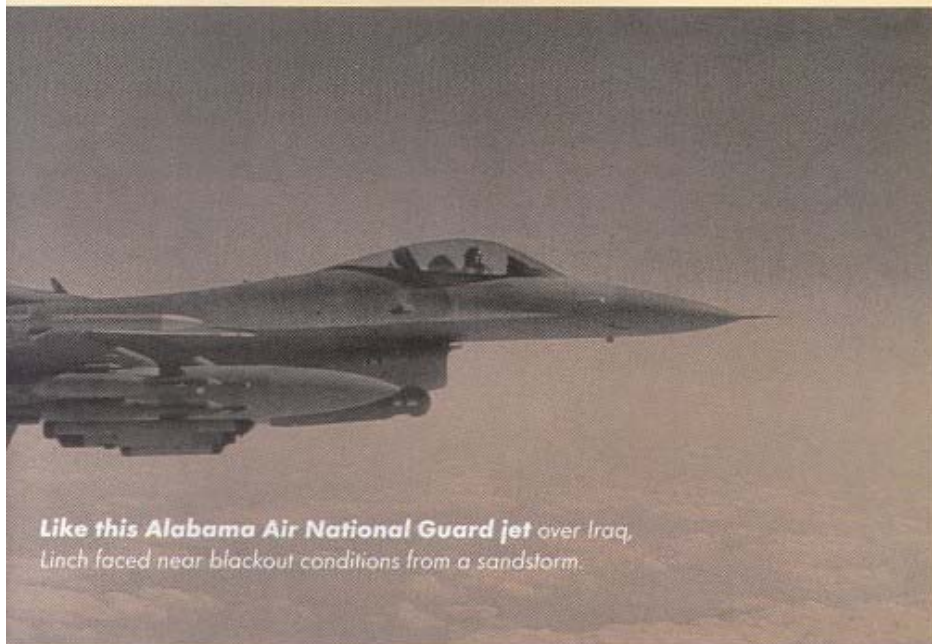
Q. *What went through your mind in dispensing the flares?*

A. This was risky in two areas: One, it highlights you to the enemy, and two, it blinds your night vision goggles.

After flying many missions over Alabama in the thick humid air, I knew that flares can blind you and create a visual illusion. However, most of the time this was done while straight and level, attempting to help someone gain the visual. The flares that night over Iraq gave us spatial disorientation since they were dispensed while maneuvering.

My FARTs check helped on this one. Though, recovering from an unusual attitude over Iraq because of my own flares wasn’t ideal. I cannot say it was a calm moment in my life.

The bottom line is that I always had an “out.” For example, if I was blinded by my flares, I could use my attitude indicator in the cockpit, although it was very dim and difficult to see without bending forward and straining to see it. This was true for my attacks, as well as the utilization of the flares. This can be true for all risk assessment. Do I have an “out” or a plan for contingencies? 



Like this Alabama Air National Guard jet over Iraq, Lynch faced near blackout conditions from a sandstorm.