
Why Did the Navy Shoot Down 290 Civilians?

A naval officer who served in the Persian Gulf explains what really went wrong—and why it may happen again.

by Scott Shuger

The first time anyone in the operating area of the *Vincennes* took an interest in scheduled airline traffic was one minute after the detection of Iran Air flight 655 on radar and six minutes before it was shot down. That vital information wasn't posted in grease-pencil on any of the Combat Information Center's many status boards nor logged just a button-push away in its computers. Instead, a crew member had to resort to riffling desperately through the hundreds of pages of fine-print in the *Official Airline Guide*. Although flight 655 was in fact listed in the guide as a regularly scheduled flight, with such a lack of research it's not surprising that nobody could find it. Even the ticket agents at airline counters keep flight schedules stored in computers. It's incredible that the Navy, with much more at stake than the timeliness of the Eastern Shuttle, should be so ill-prepared.

With the loss of 290 civilians, the *Vincennes* tragedy offers an illustration of how the Navy's readiness problems stem from human, rather than mechanical, deficiencies. After all, the failure to take account of airline traffic didn't arise from a malfunctioning radar, radio, or computer. There's been a lot

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written—much of it gushing—about the Navy that suggests otherwise. (A line from the cover story, "Tough New Navy," in the August 4, 1986, issue of *U.S. News & World Report* is typical: "Bristling with high-tech gear and missiles, the fleet is easily the most muscular America has ever put to sea.") But no matter how many wonder weapons come on the scene, the chain of command will always go through *people*. And a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Without proper planning and training, a multimillion dollar, antiair warfare system, like the Aegis radar, is no more reliable than a nervous index finger groping through an unread book.

The Defense Department flirted with this truth in its report on the shootdown. That 53-page document stated that "stress, task fixation, and unconscious distortion of data may have played a major role [in the event]." But ultimately, the Pentagon missed the point. "Singly, the errors or mistakes were not crucial to the fateful decision," stated Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. "Even cumulatively, they do not appear to change the picture in a decisive way."

This sort of PR-speak keeps the military from learning from its mistakes. Contrary to what Admiral Crowe said, the *Vincennes* episode suggests

photo: U.S. Navy



Crewmember aboard the *Vincennes* during the downing of Iran Air #655.

that the Navy still hasn't adequately developed and channeled the crucial human qualities of knowledge, judgment, and decision-making skills.

Fly 'til you drop

During the past 20 years—from say, the Israeli assault on the *Liberty* in 1967 right through to last year's attack on the *Stark*, and now the *Vincennes* tragedy—the Navy's technical superiority has often been stymied by poor *thinking*. During my own experience in the Navy from 1978 to 1983, I repeatedly found defects in the Navy's planning and preparation, defects that were individually exasperating and, collectively, indicate that the mental confusion on the *Vincennes* was especially severe but not uncommon. These are the sorts of "software" problems that get overlooked because they have to do with values, role models, and psychology—topics neither contemporary military men nor strategic thinkers have much time for.

Promotion boards seem to overlook them, preferring instead to emphasize one easy-to-use criterion—raw time on the job. In the aviation world in which I served, this simplistic approach to advancement is mightily reinforced, what with all the

flight jacket patches and wall plaques honoring pilots for getting a "thousand hours" (of flight time) and making "centurion" (achieving 100 carrier landings). Spend enough time in enough ready rooms and you could forget that there's anything to being a naval aviator besides "cats" (carrier launches) and "traps" (carrier landings). You could forget that the point of the job is to do some very tricky stuff in-between.

A clear example of this came when I was stationed on a carrier and my airwing was preparing a long-range airstrike against faraway practice targets. Most of the wing's aircrews were crammed into the ship's intelligence center to attend the final briefing before manning up their planes. At the head of the room was the airwing commander—"CAG" in naval parlance—who clearly considered himself to be The Right Stuff personified. As usual, his overriding concern seemed to be maintaining his lead as the man in navy history with the most carrier landings. After rushing through what was supposed to be a briefing on the ultimate carrier mission in less time than it takes just to give a weather brief, CAG was finished. He was almost out the door when the question came: "What about hung ordnance, CAG?" The question concerned what to do about bombs that

wouldn't come off airplanes like they're supposed to. Navy airstrike plans are supposed to include measures for dealing with such dangling destruction, because it's obviously hazardous to bring such goodies back to the carrier for a landing. But sometimes the fly-boys just . . . er . . . sort of forget to mess with details like that. Before this very sensible question was raised, no one else apparently had noticed that the topic had been completely overlooked. But CAG confronted the questioner without the slightest pause for thought. "Hung ordnance? There will be no hung ordnance on this mission," he barked, his cigar tightly clenched between his teeth. "If you have a hung bomb, climb to altitude, and fly 'til you run out of gas."

The unannounced kind

The atmosphere on the *Vincennes* and even the Defense Department's own report on the episode evince a disdain for planning. Perhaps this is why the following mental lapses were overlooked by the Pentagon:

The commercial air traffic problem was taken lightly. The Middle East and Near East may be desert, but the area is packed with commercial airliners darting between Dubai, Riyadh, and other Arab cities. Besides a full complement of intra-regional flights, there are numerous daily flights connecting Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia to Europe and Asia. There are 18 commercial air routes covering at least 50 percent of the navigable waters of the Persian Gulf alone. And this is nothing new. During my carrier service in the Northern Arabian Sea in the early 1980s, my crew mates and I spent much of our time tracking and intercepting commercial airliners. There's no reason why the computers on navy ships going into the Gulf aren't stocked with all available commercial flight information—and in readily accessible form. After arriving on station, crews of the *Vincennes* and other ships with advanced radar suites should have compared their air-track logs with available scheduling information to determine if there were big gaps between scheduled and actual flight activity.

If such gaps did emerge they should have been brought to the attention of the Gulf commander and higher authorities so that intelligence sources could analyze them and diplomatic channels could notify Iranian civil air authorities. But no such research was done, and this could have been crucial, since the Iran Air flight was 25 minutes late. The indifference to the commercial air problem cannot be blamed solely on the *Vincennes*'s Captain Rogers. According to the Defense Department report, upon

the *Vincennes*'s arrival in the gulf in May, when Rogers was briefed by the area commander, Admiral Anthony Less, there was no mention of specific air routes or commercial airline schedules. Nor were these schedules plotted on Admiral Less's flagship. The first time that Less provided commercial airline flight information—including an accurate and concise description of flight 655—to his ships was June 28, five days before the shootdown. (The Defense Department offers no explanation of why this important information was not used.) That the Navy was so dismally prepared for assessing scheduled aircraft does not speak well for its ability to handle the unannounced kind.

As the problem unfolded, the Navy did not make optimal use of communications. The *Vincennes* did place nine radio calls to Iran Air flight 655 on international distress frequencies, but there were other options that might have made the difference. The report notes that due to their heavy workloads, commercial cockpit crews generally don't monitor distress frequencies during take-off and ascent to cruise altitude. Therefore, after failing to reach the aircraft, it would have been advisable for the Navy to contact the Bandar Abbas airfield or the Tehran control center which were likely to be communicating with the pilot. But no such calls were attempted by the *Vincennes*, or by any of the other ships directly involved, or by the area commander. No one planned for this contingency. It might have taken a few minutes to try, but it would have been worth it. The Defense Department blames this lapse on "the limited number of VHF radios on U.S. surface units," which "degrades their ability to simultaneously monitor the [distress] frequency and communicate with civilian air traffic control agencies." Even waiving the question of why our trillion-dollar defense buildup has left us with a limited number of VHF radios, if the distress frequencies were unavailing, it would still have made sense to momentarily switch at least one radio on at least one ship to the Bandar Abbas airfield or Tehran control center. And why be restricted to *radio* communications? During the entire episode, the force commander's flagship was tied to the pier in Bahrain. Why couldn't somebody there have made a phone call or sent a telex?

The air cover we need

It is foolish to position surface ships in such a sensitive area without air cover. What Captain Rogers needed more than anything else was someone to see what he was up against. Given time and distance constraints, that relief could have come only via a

pilot's visual identification (navy F-14s carry television sighting equipment that make visual ID's possible at considerable ranges) But at the time, there were no aircraft positioned to answer such a call. There were no land-based fighters within range, and, at the time, the closest U.S. carrier, the *Forrestal*, was not operating in support of the *Vincennes*. Nor were there any airborne Saudi or air force AWACS or navy E-2 planes available to help clarify the *Vincennes*'s radar data. In the case of the AWACS this is especially alarming, considering that one of the main arguments for selling the planes to Saudi Arabia in the first place was that they would be there to help U.S. interests. Because radar data tends to be equivocal—in a wide variety of circumstances, a blip is a blip is a blip—the great range and track capacity of the Aegis radar system on cruisers like the *Vincennes* exacerbates rather than diminishes

uncertainty. Therefore Aegis ships require more, not less, air support than less-sophisticated vessels.

This wouldn't be the first time that the Navy has made less than optimal use of its planes. The *Stark*, too, was without air support. Additionally, in the U.S. military there's an unacceptable amount of bureaucracy involved in putting planes where they should be. In 1982, while I was serving on the carrier *Ranger*, our airwing was augmented by a detachment from the Guam-based reconnaissance squadron, VQ-1. The presence of such VQ "dets" has long caused difficulties on deployments. For one thing, the squadron flew the EA-3 Douglas Skywarrior, the largest and oldest plane regularly operating off carriers. The "Electric Whale"'s immensity drives the flight deck people nuts, and its age—it's from the early 1950s—scares everybody shitless. The mission of the VQ aircraft is to carry out elec-

by Gregg Easterbrook

...And Why Our Bombs Missed Qaddafi

The literary allusion that provides the title of this book* is slightly off, as the subjects discussed—recent U.S. antiterrorism efforts such as the Iran rescue attempt, the Libya raid, the Beirut security fiascos, and the machinations of North and company—rarely exhibit the character of "best laid" plans. The content of the book is, however, right on the money. *Best Laid Plans* is an artfully detailed and highly readable account that draws together the essentials of what has previously been revealed about American counterterrorism, while adding many compelling new details uncovered by the authors.

Martin, a Pentagon reporter for CBS News and one of the network's rising stars, and Walcott, a national security correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, wisely limit their pages devoted to Oliver North. Mainly they conclude that although North went haywire, "the fact that he was more likely to stand trial than Imad Mugniyah [mastermind of several Beirut kidnappings] is grotesque." I agree.

Beyond North, Martin and Walcott introduce a slew of other characters central to U.S. counterterrorism efforts—too many to mention here, but several having fascinating stories. Though their presentation is in general impartial, the authors evince a mild degree of clientism by subtly siding with the Pentagon in the numerous disputes about whether the military or the White House was most

to blame for counterterrorism foul-ups, perhaps a source-cultivation phenomenon, as the political *dramatis personae* of Reagan administration security planning are all either gone or will be soon, while the Pentagon is a much more permanent institution.

Regarding the Libya and Bekka Valley air raids, in which concentrated U.S. high-tech might produced at best, nebulous results against Third World targets, *Best Laid Plans* presents a fairly convincing case that political meddling was the biggest problem. On the Libya attack, Martin and Walcott report that the Air Force originally called for just six bombers flown by top pilots using tactics that would maximize their chance of survival and the chances of their precision-guided munitions (PGM) striking the targets. In addition, the Air Force had no desire to hit Muammar Qaddafi's encampment, because it was too close to civilian areas. Then, about 48 hours beforehand, Washington decided that it wanted 18 bombers, nine of them targeted specifically on Qaddafi. Four months of planning went out the window, flight crews without combat experience had to be scared up, and the phasing of the approach to Qaddafi's compound had to be mucked up so that most of the aircraft would be trying to locate their target through the smoke and dust kicked skyward by the lead bomber's ordnance. (Modern strike tactics that involve planes skimming near the ground while attempting to train sensors on their aim point make self-created smokescreens a bigger problem than they were to World War II-style bombs-away drops from higher altitudes.) In light of these considerations, that one

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**Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism*. David C. Martin, John Walcott. Harper & Row \$22.50.