

A TEST BY FIRE

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Photos by USAF

They say the test of a man is what he does when the chips are down, when he's between a rock and a hard place, when fate deals an unplanned hand.

For 11 men of the Air Force Reserve's 302nd Special Operations Squadron at Luke AFB, Arizona, their special test came early on the morning of November 21, 1980, a week before Thanksgiving.

SSgt. Dan Jaramillo remembers.

He was just returning from breakfast at the mess hall when he heard the news.

Capt. Mike Martin remembers.

He was just stepping into the shower at the Visiting Officers Quarters at Nellis AFB, where the 11 and their three Jolly Green Giant helicopters were participating in a tactical readiness exercise.

The test was to be a test by fire, for on the morning of November 21, one of this country's most tragic catastrophes claimed more than 80 lives and injured more than 300.

That night, on television, in the safety of their homes, millions of Americans would see for themselves in living color the towering smoke that marked the sprawling MGM Grand Hotel on the strip in Vegas, and would be reminded once again that life is frail.



Heavy smoke envelopes the MGM Grand Hotel, Las Vegas, NV, 22 Nov. 80.

But for Dan Jaramillo, Mike Martin, and the others of the 302nd, fate that morning was sending them scurrying for their choppers to answer an urgent call from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

They were destined to spend the next seven hours on the edge of death themselves, as they plowed their aircraft through swelling smoke to pluck men and women from the roof and balconies of the MGM Grand.

It should be noted that none of the 11 that morning set out to become the heroes they became.

Jaramillo, in his late 20s, was a Phoenix police officer called to active duty for the exercise, Red Flag. Martin, in his 30s, was working for the Air Force as an Air Reserve Technician. Others in the group included a quality control inspector for Lockheed, a corporate pilot, a postal supervisor, a grandfather, a manufacturer of waterbeds, and an Air Force Academy graduate who had seen action in Vietnam.

They were all Air Force Reservists with years of active duty experience, now assigned to the 302nd and dedicated to the squadron's mission of airlifting troops and equipment into and out of hostile territory.

But nothing could have prepared them totally for this particular morning in Nevada. Their years of experience, of practice, and their appreciation for human life came together at a special point in time.

Disaster has a way of changing all the rules, and the new rules on November 21 were to improvise and innovate.

But the story is best told by the events of that day.

Captain Martin: "I had just gotten out of the shower when they called. When he said the MGM, I just looked at him. Then I stepped outside, and you could see the smoke."



Four members of the 302nd SOS who took part in the rescue operation: Capt. Michael Martin, MSgt James Connett, TSgt Daniel Jaramillo, and MSgt William Reynolds.

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TEST BY FIRE (Cont.)

Captain Dave Ellis: "I remember Colonel Wood coming by saying 'get up, the MGM's on fire.' I thought it was a joke. he said 'it's no joke, it's for real!'"

Lt Col Bruce Wood is the 302nd's commander. He had been alerted by the Nellis consolidated command post, and now he was getting his crews together for whatever they could be called upon to do.

Wood's three CH-3E Sikorsky Sea King helicopters were in the air by 8:45 on their five-mile run to the MGM. They joined three Bell UH-1N Hueys from the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlbut Field, Florida, also at Nellis for the tactical exercise.

Three additional Air Force helicopters used were Hueys based at Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Field, about 40 miles north of Las Vegas.

Throughout the next several hours, Air Force helicopters made dozens of trips to the MGM Grand and rescued more than 90 survivors from the roof. The Hueys also carried firemen and rescue people to the hotel roof and down again when they became exhausted.

A parking lot nearby served as a helicopter landing pad and air operations command post.

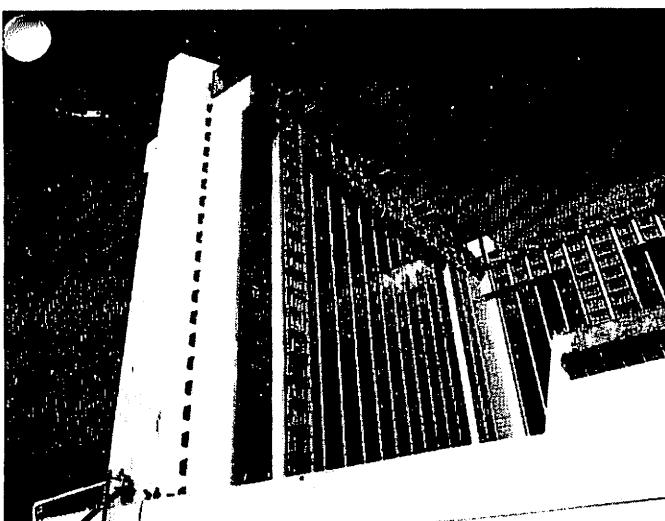
First helicopters on the scene could have been just as easily landing in a combat zone, according to 302nd pilot Captain Lester Smith.

Captain Smith: "There was a lot of smoke obscuring our vision, and we weren't able to get in on our initial passes."

The billowing black smoke was surging from parts of the roof, through vents, and streaming from windows.

Captain Ellis remembers thinking how much the hotel looming above the city that early morning resembled an erupting volcano.

"It looked real bad, real bad, and I could see people waving towels and signs from the balconies where they were stuck," he said.



In moments when the clouds of smoke dissipated, there were few telltale signs of the battle for life going on inside the huge hotel.

Dozens of hotel guests stood on their balconies, holding signs calling for attention and begging for help.

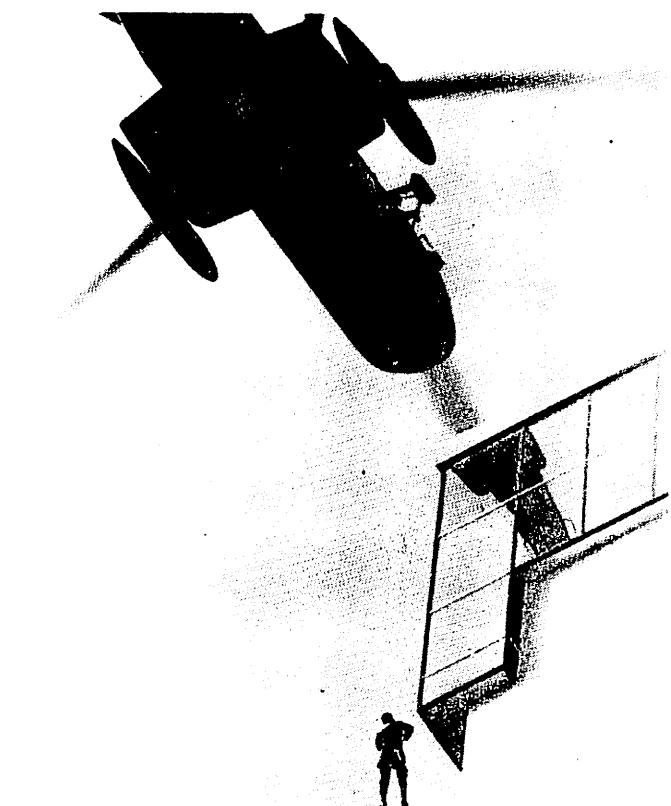
The signs were poignant in their simplicity: "My husband had a heart attack . . . My wife is pregnant."

At first the 302nd helicopters were used mostly to fan away the perilous smoke so that the other, lighter choppers could rescue those people who had managed somehow to reach the roof. The Jolly Green Giants moved as close to the structure as they could without slamming their 31-foot rotor blades into the hotel.

Someone suggested that their rescue hoists be used, but the balcony overhangs prevented the choppers from moving close enough to the building to drop the vertical slings.

Necessity, which — fortunately — often mothers invention, supplied a solution as the helicopters inched closer and closer to the structure.

Continued



TSgt Jerry Fletcher of the 302nd Special Operations Squadron, a reserve unit from Luke AFB, Arizona, is lowered near a balcony.

COMPLETE PROCEEDINGS OF THE RABAT CONFERENCE

The Permanent Secretariat of the ICDO has printed the complete Record of the Proceedings of the 9th World Civil Defence Conference, Rabat, November 1980. The document, available in two languages (English and French), includes the introductory reports and accounts of the Working Commissions, i.e.:

Analysis and Impact of Disasters — by Prof. Leonardo Lugli, Member of the San Marino Permanent Secretariat for natural disasters in the Mediterranean area, Principal of the Institute of Architecture and Town-Planning of the University of Bologna.

Sociology and psychology of disaster — by Prof. Enrico L. Quarantelli, Director, Disaster Research Center, Ohio State University, Columbus (USA).

Disaster methodology — by Col. Charles Chandessais, former Director, Psycho-sociological Study Centre on Disasters and their Prevention, Paris.

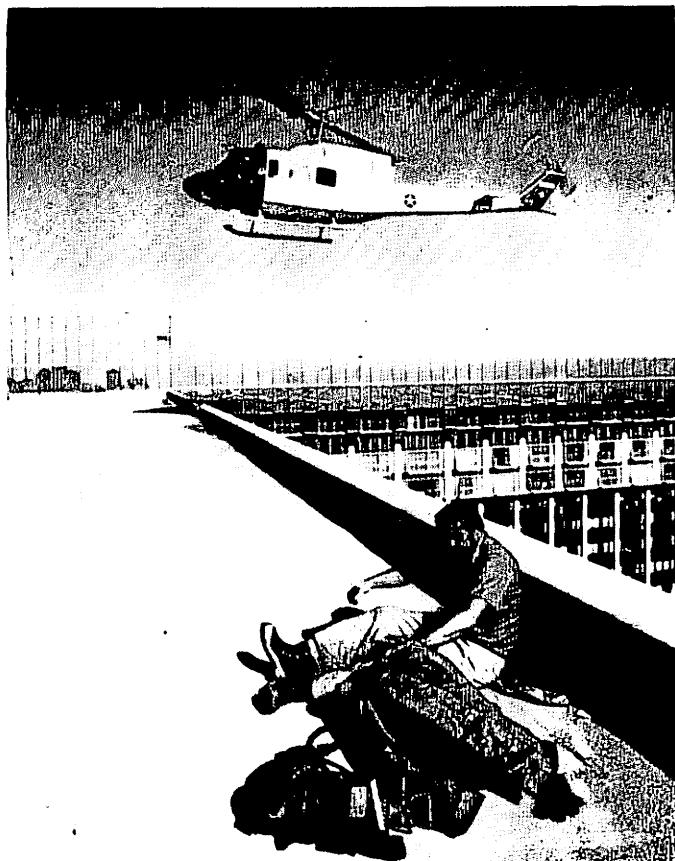
Disaster preparedness and organization of relief — by Mr. Ernest Reymann, Director, Civil Protection Service of Greater Geneva.

Protective constructions against the effects of disasters — by Prof. Driss Ben Sari, Director, National Planning and Coordination Centre for Scientific and Technical Research, Rabat.

The Proceedings are printed in a limited number of copies; therefore, institutions and persons interested in purchasing the document are requested to send their order without delay to the Permanent Secretariat of the ICDO indicating the number of copies desired. **Price per copy: 15.-Swiss francs or 10.-US dollars (airmail postage included).**

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TEST BY FIRE PHOTOS



Huey approaches roof where exhausted firefighter rests.



Maj Larry Doege piloted the first Air Force helicopter to arrive on the scene.



Woman survivor is reeled into a CH-3C helicopter.



UH-1N Huey from Det. 1 of the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing circles near the MGM (not in photo).



Patrolman Tom Mildrew (L) and Sgt Harry Christopher of the Las Vegas Police Dept. Air Support Unit.

TEST BY FIRE (cont.)

Captain Martin: "I had my guy carry a cargo strap down on the hoist and as he pulled level with the balcony, he tossed one to the people. They would pull the strap and start the sling swinging like a pendulum. Once close enough, my guy would grab the balcony railing and scale it."

Two flight engineers aboard the Martin chopper rode the hoist downward.

First, MSgt Bill Reynolds went.

Five times the hoist came back.

Five people saved.

Then, MSgt Jim Connell, a grandfather, went down.

Two times the hoist returned.

Two more people saved.

"When I'd get on the balcony, I'd get out and strap the people in, one at a time," Sergeant Connell said.

"It was the only way we could be sure they were in securely, and we didn't want to drop anyone once they cleared the edge of the balcony," he added.

In their fear and confusion, some of those who pleaded to be rescued from their balconies had to be coaxed into the slings for their ride a hundred or more feet to the hovering choppers.

Sergeant Connell: "Some of the older people, especially, wouldn't budge from where they were. One said she was scared of heights. So I sweet-talked her. Told her it was the only way out."

Captain Dave Ellis, helping with the hoist in Captain Martin's helicopter, said there were mixed reactions when people finally reached the safety of the chopper.

"One of them went straight to a corner of the aircraft and cried. For another, it was like a family reunion - lots of hugging and kissing," he said.

TSgt Jim Hodges and TSgt Jerry Fletcher were flight engineers on the chopper piloted by Captain Smith and Major Larry Lybarger.

Hodges said one lady rescued took from her dress a set of wings I tried to give them to him.

She was so happy, she just wanted to give me something, anything," he said.

Fletcher was at the end of the hoist.

Two more people saved.

During the long morning hours, as many as 30 helicopters from as far away as Southern California sliced through the heavy black smoke on their spontaneous shuttle flights to take as many survivors from the hotel as possible. Sergeant Harry Christopher, chief helicopter pilot for the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, controlled air traffic from his chopper, as Air Force helicopters and those from other law enforcement agencies and private businesses churned between danger and safety.

Sergeant Jaramillo was the flight engineer aboard one of the 302nd's Sea Kings, along with hoist operator MSgt Ray Reynoso.



Flight engineer from the 302nd straps survivor onto a stretcher.



Det 1 crewmen offload emergency medical equipment on roof of the hotel.

Jaramillo would ride the sling down, clamber onto one of the balconies, then strap people in for the ride back up. Once everyone was aboard, he would take the sling topside himself.

Jaramillo's second lift was a pregnant woman.

The MGM Grand experience was indeed a special test for all those, who, by fate or by fortune, happened to be there, and who willingly gave their time and talents.

Those who did have been officially praised for their participation. But for the men of the 302nd, no award could equal the genuine appreciation of those who were lifted from their private hell and into waiting arms.

They above all, had survived their test by fire.

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