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Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

The Unthinkable, the Unimaginable Happened: An F-117 was Shot Down in Combat

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko reflects on his experience as the only stealth fighter mission shot down during combat and his accomplishment and fortitude in an against-all-odds scenario.

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: It is really, really good to see you and what a great collection of high speed hometown USA citizens. This was the first official photo of the F-117. If you recall, in November 1988 the Air Force acknowledged the existence of a program and then released this photo. The first thing I'd like to do is thank you; thank you for who you are and what you do. You are all, no matter what your former nature of service, you are all serving as passionate, professional Americans so I would like to thank you. You're all such a mighty and vital part of our war fighting capability and everyday peacetime service. You all know the emotions, you all know the intensity and you all know the professionalism so thank you for who you are and what you do. There is so much we can talk about. We don't have too much time this evening but what I'd like to do is give you a taste and a sense and a feel for what it's all about using the Vega-31. The Vega-31 was the F-117 Shoot Down in Combat Search and Rescue; that is how it's known. Using the Vega-31 event is merely one example of countless many, one example of what it's all about, and it's all about all of us. It's not about just the pilots, it's not about just the maintainers, and it's not about just the active duty military; it's about citizens and all of us.

The notes I'm going to use... just one week after the event I thought, "You know what? I need to capture and collect my thoughts and my emotions and put it into something somewhat organized" and I did that just a week after this event happened. And then about another week after that... and I'm glad I did because a week after that General Hawley, who was the Commander of Air Combat Command at the time asked me if I would be willing to go out and share and visit with his Spring of 1999 Commanders Conference and I was to be the mystery guest speaker at the end of the first day of the conference. And I agreed and so I'm glad I had these notes sketched out, and these are the same exact notes that I'm going to share and use with you guys tonight.

Let me tell you about that conference real quick. No kidding, I was up on the stage, they dimmed the lights, it was dark to the point where I could barely make out shapes and they put the spotlight on me. General Hawley was chairing it. He was flanked by four Lieutenant Generals, 10 Major Generals, 33 Brigadier Generals and 66 Bird Colonels. And I hadn't prepared anything. I mean, I had some of my raw, rough scratched out notes that I have here tonight, the same notes, and I hadn't prepared anything. I certainly hadn't thought about what I was going to say to start it off. I just lived through that event,

certainly I'll think of something to say. You can imagine. And I was silent for probably at least ten seconds and then I said, "You know what? A couple of weeks ago I was just involved in a violent shoot down ejection and against all odds, Combat Search and Rescue, and I wasn't scared. But right now I am really scared."

I want to share a little book with you that I have now. A number of years ago I was invited by the Hill Air Force Base CGOC (Company of Great Officers Council) to share and visit with them, and afterwards they gave me this booklet 'Eastern Europe Phrase Book' and down here it says 'Don't just stand there say something.' It has a complete section on Serbian and they also wrote me this nifty little note and they picked out some Serbian with its English translation, some samples they thought that I would need and they said, "Sir, some useful phrases for the next time you're in the area." The first one is 'Help', the next one is 'I'm from the USA', 'There has been an accident', 'I need a mechanic', 'I've lost my aero plane', 'Is there a campsite nearby?', 'Do you have a local map?', 'Can I take photographs?' and 'I'd like a one way ticket.' So I now carry this with me everywhere; you never know.

March 27th1999- the unthinkable, the unimaginable happened. An F-117 went down in combat. And if you kill that video right now and everybody promises not to tell anybody I'll tell you how it really happened. It was just getting a little stuffy in the cockpit and I needed some fresh air. Plus, you know, I heard that there were some really per diem for Belgrade so I wanted to get in on some of that.

I'll give you a quick what we were doing and where we were on the war- this was the fourth night of Operation Allied Force; the air war in Yugoslavia, former Republic of Yugoslavia. I had flown on the first wave, first night, I flew on the third night and this was the fourth night now, my third sortie for that war. The weather was very bad, so bad that they cancelled all the NATO attack missions; every single NATO strike package was cancelled that night. The only game in town was our one wave of eight F-117s. We had a second wave planned a little bit later on in the night and then about three and a half hours after our wave we had a wave of B-2s. So the only guys in town were the LO guys, the low observable guys, for that night. We took off out of Aviano Air Base in Italy, flew across Slovenia. My grandmother, by the way, immigrated from Ljubljana, right after World War-I. I used to have a 'J' in my name; it used to be Z-E-L-J-K-A-O. So I did a wing rock over the top of Ljubljana. Into Hungary, rejoined with the tankers, refueled. At my push time I got topped off with fuel, dropped off the tanker, stealth up-ed and made my way into Croatia. Mt route of flight was roughly the northern part of Yugoslavia, down along the Romanian border. I won't confirm or deny if I went into Romanian airspace. Then I turned a sharp right and went essentially from east to west across Belgrade. My target was downtown Belgrade, a very key command and control facility; a very, very deep strategic target, very heavily defended as you can imagine. Coming off the target I was successful, which was the good news. It turned out to be a very expensive target. About a minute and a half, turned up to the north west and that was when it happened. Rolled out... I sit with the seat all the way up so the clearance between the top of my helmet and the canopy is only about a fist distance, to start with. I like to look outside, I like to keep my situational awareness very, very, very high so I actually

acquired the missiles visually right after launch as they punched through the really low layer of clouds. I picked out two missiles, there might have been more; as soon as I saw those I knew... you know, I flew combat missions in the F-117 in Desert Storm and so I had a lot of combat experience and I saw a lot of SAM launches, Surface to Air Missile launches, I saw an enormous amount of AAA particularly in Desert storm but that was, of all the combat missions I had flown and all the times I had been shot at that was the first time I actually thought immediately, "They've got me, they've got me." I tracked the first missile- it went right over the top of me. I was really surprised it didn't proximity fuse but it was close enough that it buffeted and rocked the aircraft. I reacquired the second missile and I thought it was going to run right into me. It sure felt like it. I don't know for sure if it proximity fused or exactly what happened but it was extremely violent as you can imagine. It slammed, immediately the aircraft into an uncontrolled left roll, negative G-tuck. I estimate... and meanwhile I'm still trying to fly the airplane and there is nothing. I was in seven, if not more, negative Gs. And the guys at the Lockheed Skunk Works affirmed that with me and said probably more. Even though I strap in very, very tight with that ejection seat, just one with that seat... I always take all of that very, very seriously; even though that was the case because of the physics on my body and the aircraft, the way the G forces were loading on my body in the aircraft my body was sliding out from underneath the lap belt. And because I sit real high to start with I was pinned against the top of the canopy. My whole upper body and my whole torso down like this, my butt way out of the seat. And if you know anything about ejection seats that is the worst possible position I could have been in for an ejection. The entire event, actually the very, very violent shoot down, the violent ejection, the against-all-odds Combat Search and Rescue was very, very calm for me. Even though I was in this hyper state of intensity, as you can imagine, just this extremely high level of situational awareness and intensity, at the same time I kind of, went into this hyper state of calm, if you will, simultaneously. And my nature is to keep things pretty light, a light and humorous sort of a way anyway, and that was kind of, how it was for the entire event. So I remember being pinned in the top of the straps underneath these severe negative Gs, and the point of total incapacitation for negative Gs is about 3 to 3.5 and I'm at least double that; straining, pushing against these Gs to get my hands down to the side handles for the ejection and they're way down there now because I'm way up here. So many things went through my mind. One was just very calmly, very matter of factly, "You know what? This is really, really, really bad. Chances are I'm going to break my neck, have massive lumber injuries if I even live" which was a miracle that I even lived, truly. Another miracle- that I did not sustain any immediately debilitating injuries. I thought, "Hey, you know what? Maybe if I push isometrically with the back of my head against the canopy kind of what a wrestler does" I wrestled in high school- I was on my back a lot. So I got really good at bridging out; you know that bridge maneuver? "Maybe if I do that when the canopy blows off my upper body will somehow get into a better body position for the ejection; I don't know." So I'm doing that. I remember every moment, every fragment, every essence of my strike mission, the shoot down, the ejection and the combat Search and Rescue except one; there is one fragment I have no memory of. To this day I cannot get a hold of it and hold on to it, and that is actually reaching the handles and pulling them. I remember thinking, "This is bad" starting to strain to try to get a fingertip on the handles, and the next thing I remember is I'm in the seat, I'm out of the aircraft and the

cockpit is falling away from me. There is no doubt in my mind that I had some help with that.

I'm in the seat, the seat is tumbling; very, very violent I'm thinking, "Okay, how come I'm still in the seat, how come I'm still in the seat?" a lot of thoughts going through my mind. I was deep into this phenomenon called Temple Distortion. Many of you may have experienced this in your lives, you know, such as a really bad traumatic car accident or, you know, you get mugged or something like that; just some traumatic incident where time slows down tremendously. Real time might be five seconds but it seemed like it was twenty minutes sort of a thing. A lot of thoughts were going through my mind; still in the seat. I remember thinking... just a few sample thoughts; one of them was, you know, again, in a real light, humorous sort of a way and I imagined myself kicking the dirt say, "Jeez, isn't this inconvenient" you know, "My mom is not going to be happy with me and I might not be able to call my daughter tomorrow on her birthday" she was going to turn ten years old. And I also remember thinking... I also remember imagining to kind of, at a lunch counter standing next to the Serbian SAM operator who just shot me down having a light conversation saying, "You know, really good shot but you're not getting me" and it wasn't a cocky arrogant, "You're not getting me" sort of an attitude but that was when I first remembered, still in the seat, first remembered this enormous flood of determination flow over me and it was a realization of, "Okay, they just got the ultimate aircraft but I'm the ultimate prize and I get through everything possible to prevent them from getting the pilot." Then I realized what was at stake. So it was a huge swell of determination that came over me. I'm still in the seat, I'm still in the seat. "How come I'm still in the seat?" and this is what it seemed like real time; the amount of time I'm taking to tell you. "Maybe the seat is not working right, you know, maybe it's in Mode-3" which if you're at a higher speed, high altitude it takes a lot before the seat kicks you out. "I don't know." I put my hand on the emergency actuation lever- you can override the normal sequence, the automatic sequence if you think it's malfunctioning. Activate that. That will mainly blow your lap belt open and you can wriggle out of the seat and get your parachute out of the top of the seat and try to manually get yourself out of the ejection seat and get a full parachute. "No, I'd better not pull that because if the seat is working automatically and I pull that it's really going to foul things up. One potato, two potato, three potato, four potato..." boom, it kicked me out and then under canopy. To give you an idea, it turns out I was in Mode-1 or Mode-2 so from pulling handles to under a fully inflated parachute is 1.4 seconds real time. It went from extreme violence to instant calm like somebody flicked the switch. From that extreme violence to all of a sudden I was in this glorious calm and all I remember hearing is this "Swish, swish, swish" and I looked down and it was the gentle normal isolation of the canopy, the parachute. And my one-man life raft and seat kit had automatically deployed and was hanging 25 ft below me on lanyard and that was what was swishing through the air. It was almost a full moon night. I didn't even think to check for injuries. I've got my seat kit, I've got my life raft. Hmm, one of my knee boards is gone and one is still there; that is kind of, strange. I've got my survival vest. It looks like I got all my equipment. Chin strap is off, visor is gone, oxygen mask is still on so I took that off. Check canopy- yes, I could see it you know, in the almost full moon night I could see it perfectly. No malfunctions, no streamers, no line-overs, no may west, no blown panels. And my second thought was, "You have got to be

kidding me. An orange and white paneled parachute. Really?" glowing like a Chinese lantern, you know. In our survival vest we had a pocket down here that had two regular signal flares. You know, each one has a day end and a night end; the day end is smoke if you pop that, the night end is a little old flame. And I remember, again, in a light, casual humorous sort of a way, I remember tapping that actually and thinking, "Well jeez, why don't I just get one of these out, too, and wave it around." A lot of thoughts went through my mind. We were not trained up until that point. Things have changed a little bit now, but all of our training was, "Hey, if you find yourself in that situation don't do anything other than treat yourself, check for injuries, make sure you're okay, start to treat yourself for shock, maybe start to get a little orientation but don't do anything until you're on the ground. Secure your land site, find an initial hole up site, get settled in your hole up site and then worry about getting on the radio and making contact." That just didn't seem right for me in my situation. I was well aware that we had an enormous amount of air breathing and non-air breathing national and international assets out there but I thought, "You know what? There is still a good chance nobody knows this just happened. I'm out here, single ship, no wingman, I'm not talking, I'm not squawking. I need to get this thing going. I need to..." it was very, very important for me to immediately make good two way contact with some friendlies, not only because I realized how critical time was in a Combat Search and Rescue but also, I thought, "You know what? I've got essentially, a walkie-talkie- my radio. For a limited line of sight, no secure voice, no over-the-horizon capability my best chance of getting Comm with anybody is at an altitude." And the third thing that went through my mind was, "There is a really good chance that as soon as I hit the ground I'm going to immediately be captured" and it was important that I at least make initial contact with friendlies before that happened. So I got out my radio; less than a minute under canopy and I started making May Day calls. My call was... and I tried to speak very, very quickly. I'm normally a very slow and deliberate sort of a talker. Normally, actually, I'm not a talker at all. My mom is amazed that I share and visit with folks because she says to people, "You know, in his first eighteen years of life we didn't get three words out of him, in the entire eighteen years." But I tried to talk quickly to minimize my time on the radio, trying to have as good of radio discipline as possible. So the call that I thought I would make was, "May Day, May Day, May Day. Vega-31, I'm going down" and then I thought, you know, if I give them a little 10-or-12 second blast of my emergency locator transmitter, you know, that siren sounding thing which I can do manually on my radio, then they'll put those together and think, "Hey, he's going down. He said he's going down and he just gave us his ELT which means he's probably not in the aircraft so he's probably under canopy." So I wanted to build our guys' situational awareness without giving too much away to the Serbs who I figured were listening to all of this.

I've got an eight minute audio clip that I'm going to play for you next. This is actual audio from my May Day call. Let me tell you a little about it so it means a little bit more to you as you're listening. The breathing that you hear is actually Vega-32. So this is another F-117 in the area. He had turned on his cockpit recorder and it's his recording from his cockpit, so you hear his breathing in his oxygen mask. You'll hear... let me look at my notes. You'll hear other transmissions on guard and the primary strike frequency that we were using. Sometimes you'll hear me say, "Going down." Some of the other part

of my radio call was just getting cut out. You'll hear the 10-to-15 second burst of emergency locator beacon. You'll hear "Magic" this was the call sign of the British AWACS that was out there. You'll also notice, as you're listening, that at first it appeared I was getting some good two way Comm with them but it didn't happen. Interestingly, of all the assets out there the only folks that I could get good two way Comm. With was a KC-135 tanker, believe it or not, refueling a force of F-16s in Bosnia- call sign 'Frank-36.' At one point it sounds like I'm getting a little excited and kind of shouting. What that was, was I wasn't sure if anybody was receiving my transmission so I just raised my voice up, you know, half of a notch. But actually, I mean, they're going to have the volume cranked up here but this was about how quietly I was talking, just about like this, on the radio. So even though I had limited line of sight I was at altitude and it was pretty effective. But again, I was n't able to establish good two way comm. Until Frank-36, 'Mr. Johnny On the Spot' answered up. You'll hear Frank-36 ask me... he'll say, "Say status" and I remember thinking, "... going down." That was all I could think of saying. "It's what I have been telling you." you'll also hear him ask me for my last position in reference to the bull's eye. A bull's eye was a predetermined point out there that only the friendlies knew, that you could give your position off of, you know, of distance and range to sort of, covertly tell somebody else where you were off of a bull's eye point. And of course, I had no way of figuring that out. I wasn't in the aircraft anymore. But I remember thinking that was really funny and I thought I'd kind of, be a little bit of a wise guy and you'll hear my response. "State your last position in reference to bull's eye" and I said, "In the aircraft" as my last position. But then I thought maybe I need to give him a little more information and I told him, "Point after target" and my idea there was if that information got back to Aviano our guys in the planning shop could whip out a quick map, plot my route of flight on it, put a big circle around my point after my target and have some rough idea that I'm around there somewhere. Again Frank-36, Captain Mark Barony, the pilot... I have connected with so many of the folks involved in the Combat Search and Rescue and it has been very, very gratifying for me to be able to do that. When I talked to Frank-36 he said, "Yeah, we just finished refueling these F-16s, I was looking out over towards the Belgrade area and all of a sudden I noticed a series of airborne explosions and then one really big one and then less than two minutes later I heard this Vega-31 guy on guard frequency making May Day calls." So let's run the audio.

[audio from flight data recorder]

You'll start to hear other Vegas.

[audio]

F-117s doing their in-flight recording with AWACS.

[audio]

Now I didn't hear that radio call where he said, "Can we be of further assistance?" Good thing I didn't.

[audio]

Rotten meant did not get my target.

[audio]

He said, "Highlight film" which means he did get his target. We were actually less than 50% hits that night because of the weather.

[audio]

That is good. We can stop the...

The last point where I talked to Frank-36, at that point I was satisfied that I had made good two way contact and I turned the radio off and I tucked it away and I got busy doing other stuff.

There is Belgrade, the town of Ruma and I was about maybe a mile south of this major four lane highway. I had touched down about 50 yards west of a north south running two-lane hardball that went into Ruma and it connected with a town south of me so I was about three and a half miles south of Ruma, south-south east and then about a mile/mile and a half north of the town of Bujanovac, which is roughly where the aircraft went down. So when I came down I was probably one to two miles at the most, away from the wreckage which was very, very close. I estimate I was well within the most concentrated area of their search activity, the Serbian search activity. This is a Serbian youth sitting in my ejection seat. What this photo is really good for is... I'm not sure if that is a Churchill-ian victory sign or what that is. But it's a good photo to give you the lay of the land. Even up in altitude, as far as I could see it was open flat farm fields; very, very challenging for cover and concealment.

Let me tell you something about my wife. My wife, she is still in wonder at how she could ever express her gratitude and her thanks to the Combat Search and Rescue team. To know my wife you would never have thought there could've been a better day than her wedding day. I'll simply say that my wife tells folks, "You know what? That was the worst day of my life and then the best day of my life, better even than my wedding day."

Pilots- I've had so many pilots come up to me and take me off to the side privately because, you know, they would never admit this in front of the fellows I'm sure, and say to me, "You lived my worst nightmare, not only as an aviator who could be isolated behind enemy lines." But, you know, 117 guys were going after the strategic deep, most heavily defended targets; very, very high risk of capture type of scenarios and we were aware of that. And also, F-117 pilots realizing we're not invisible; we know that. We're low observable which means we do have vulnerabilities, we do have limitations.

The Serbians- very capable, highly trained, very skilled and extremely motivated war fighters.

The Combat Search and Rescue assets- I have connected with so many of these folks who were involved in that CSAR and these are highly trained, highly skilled, extremely experienced, seasoned war fighters, many of them with seasoned combat aviators and they have all told me exactly the same thing, that that CSAR was the most challenging, the most intense, the most physically, mentally, emotionally exhausting peacetime or wartime mission they had ever been involved in.

Next slide. This is the only slide with words. Just to consider, the Combat Search and Rescue assets, which does include the survivor, is part of that team. Their role and responsibility is in training. How best to involve the media- that is always a tough one, to know how to play out in the enormity and magnitude of what was accomplished.

During the repatriation I remember so vividly, the faces and the emotions of those I greeted on the ramp at Aviano as I jumped off that C-130. The sun hadn't been up very long but everybody had been up all night with me. They all shared a very similar face, faces struggling to know how I'd be. A face combined with shock and deep concern, disturbed faces of uncertainty and disbelief, at the same time faces of indescribable relief and pride.

Reflect on the enormity and magnitude of what was accomplished; not only did it deeply touch the families and all the war fighters and all the country but think how far reaching and deep reaching this successful CSAR was for the entire operation and for the future of personnel recovery.

It took me probably a little over two days to finally make my way back to my room, my lodging room at Aviano. I got there, I was dropped off and I was told, "Okay, you can probably grab a shower and a couple of hours nap but somewhere in this window here President Clinton is going to call you." I couldn't sleep anyway. I took a long, long shower, took off my boots, left them right there at the entrance of the door. When I got out of the shower I was still in this very high level of intensity, still evading, and I looked at those boots and I laughed and I thought "You know, I'm not going to touch those until I get a camera" and so a few days later I went to the BX at Aviano and bought one of those deposable jobs and took a photo of it, still with all the Serbian soil clinging to the sides and the bottoms. But what I'd like to point out here is I think it's getting a little ridiculous what an Airman has to go through these days to get a new pair of boots. You know, for years I had been trying to get a new pair of boots and it was the obvious trauma to these old leathers that finally convinced them I could have a new pair and that is what I've been wearing since, right here. Holloman has these boots, by the way; I gave them to the Holloman History Office.

The overall attitude these days regarding the media seems to be that the natural and expected course of things is to immediately go before the media and tell it all. Well I wasn't comfortable with that, and I've always avoided public recognition and notoriety; it's just not my way to do otherwise. My nature is to be a quite professional. Some of the other reasons for my not going public with names and personal identities- safety and security of individuals who were at stake; this was only the fourth night of the war. I

didn't want the personal media attention and recognition and celebrity because the notoriety needed to be for everyone, not just for me. And I didn't want individual personal attention and recognition to take away from the most important focus. The focus needed to be on everyone and on the enormous amount of work still to be done. Again, this story is not about me, it's about all of us.

This is some of the crew of Gator-07 the call sign of the MH-60 that actually landed and snatched me up. You've got the co-pilot on the far left, Matt Glover. He was a 1994 Air Force Academy graduate whom I knew when I was in Air Officer Commanding at the Air Force Academy. He wasn't on my squadron but I knew him very well because he was the Squadron Commander of a cadet summer training program, at basic cadet training, and I was involved with that and got to know him very, very well. Matt and I didn't have any contact after he graduated from the academy until five years later when he came to save me. Pilot- Captain Chad Franks, second from left. Joe Kirsch- Staff Sergeant Joe Kirsch, left door gunner. And Senior Airman, Shawn Swift on the far right. There is another member of their team who was on that mission call signed *Skillet* on top of that mini gun there is a little beanie baby. It's actually a steer that they named *Skillet*. These guys were doing an air show at some time, Static Display. They figure a child had left their beanie baby in their aircraft when they were climbing around the aircraft on a Static Display for the air show and so they adopted *Skillet* and *Skillet*, to this day, I understand, is still with that unit. It's all about all of us. It's about patriotism, it's about the superb Combat Search and Rescue, it's about pride; pride that the public can feel for their own. It's about inspiration, it's about gratitude and it's about the day after day intense devotion to duty and performance of duty of our military. It's an inspiring story that a very grateful country can be so proud of.

You already met Joe Kirsch, left door gunner. These are a few other guys who were onboard. Air Rescue man- Marshal Jordan, PJ Team Leader- Eric Giacchino, Reservist out of Portland, and then Combat Controller- Master Sergeant D. J Cantwell.

Over the years many people have shown me many articles written on the F-117 going down and the Combat Search and Rescue. Particularly early on there was not a lot of information available and there was much speculation. In these articles I read about this particular piece of equipment that certainly must have been used and of that particular capability we certainly must have and isn't technology and sophistication just so marvelous. And of course, the CSAR must have gone like clockwork. Well this Combat Search and Rescue was far from flawless. Some of the equipment and capabilities reported we didn't have or we don't have at all, and of the equipment we did have some of it didn't work and some of its capabilities were not functioning. And certainly, technology and sophistication are very, very important but what about the human, what about the operator? This Combat Search and Rescue was successful because of training and preparation, individual training and preparation that was taken seriously and paid attention to. It was successful because of a trust and a faith and a confidence in a fellow team member. It was successful because of fierce determination and drive, unfaltering discipline and extraordinary situational awareness and airmanship. This Combat Search and Rescue was successful because in spite of the enormous risks and confusions and

danger and complexity and uncertainty and hostility, there was a great deal of calm, a presence of mind, sound and sensible moment-by-moment decision making; there was a lot of innovation and improvisation and there was a whole lot of guts.

This is the crew of OGRE-01; this was the MC-130 Combat Shadow. These guys were involved in the CSAR refueling the helicopters at night on the Serbian border at 500 feet, if you can even imagine. These guys also were the ones who, after the ex-filtration, we landed in Bosnia in Tuzla, trans-loaded me to the C-130 and they flew me on the two hour flight back to Aviano.

Training and preparation- to me this is all about motivation and determination. Without that individual motivation and determination the training and preparation is not going to do you a whole lot of good. In this scenario there was not the luxury of time; there was no time to think about it, there was no time to consider it, there was no time to reference the owner's manual, there was no time for uncertainty about what to do or how to do it. This event started very suddenly, very unexpectedly that an F-117 would go down, and very violently. And for the next eight hours until we were relatively safe, which was helicopter is about five minutes out of Tuzla, there was no time for hesitation, there was no time to flinch.

This Combat Search and Rescue assets, God bless them all. Let me give you just a taste of some of the assets involved. Here are some of the airborne folks. AWACS- British and the NATO AWACS, ABCCC- Airborne Command and Control platform; we had four airborne ISR (Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance) platforms, we had the joint Compass Call, U2, at Joint Stars, we had F-16 CJs, the four-ship of CJs that was airborne that night ended up having to roll and switch instantly, their whole mission to now be the initial On Scene Commander, which they had no training in, for the Combat Search and Rescue and they were magnificent. We had Italian Tornados, we had F-15Cs, we had tankers plus Frank-36, we had an AC-130 gunship that got airborne but did not actually execute, we had A-10 Sandys. The Sandy mission, for those not familiar, is the rescue Mission Commander - Rescue Escort mission for a Combat Search and Rescue. We had helicopters, we had the MC-130, we had Marine EA-6 Prowlers. Some of the folks... just a taste of the folks on the ground- we had the electronic combat cell at Aviano, we had the Joint Forces Air Component Commander, the Personnel Recovery Coordination Center, we had the Combined Air Operation Center, we had the Joint Special Ops Task Force Nobel Anvil involved and directly involved, as Combat Search and Rescue team members we had SERE specialists, SERE being an acronym standing for Survival, Evasion, Resistance & Escape or what folks commonly call the Survival Specialists. We had the SERE specialists represented by my training, my initial combat survival training and my only combat survival training that I had at the Air Force Academy in the summer of 1978, 21-years before. We also had, as Combat Search and Rescue team members our Squadron Life Support Shop represented by my refresher training, by all of my survival and evasion equipment that I had on me. We had the Holloman Wing Egress Shop as part of that Combat Search and Rescue team represent by my Egress System, my ejection system. We had Squadron Intel folks represented by my refresher training, by my evasion plan of action preparation, by my preparation of my individual personal information that

was crucial for the success of this Combat Search and Rescue which we used repeatedly for authentication and responsible for so many other things as well, our Squadron Intel. We had the survival equipment shop or what we used to call the fabrication shop. Felix, by the way, is the professional who made it possible for the rest of the CSAR folks to have something to do that night. Felix is who packed my parachute. And we had the survivor or the evader as part of that team.

This is a photo of the four-ship of F-16 CJs. I won't tell you their real names because you know fighter pilots, they like those call signs so I'll just tell you this is Kujo, Duke, Fish and Meat.

Reflect for a moment on an extract that I took from an article written by James Pinkerton, November 10th 1999. The title of the article was 'The Right History Because of the Right Leaders.' "There are moments in history when events, themselves, are soft when a single pair of hands can shape them to flow in one direction while another pair of hands might push outcomes the opposite way." There were so many pairs of hands shaping and influencing that night in just the right way. War fighting is so fluid, it's moment-by-moment. The Combat Search and Rescue Task Force's objective was the downed pilot, the survivor, the evader. The survivor is part of the team and can have an enormous impact on the success or failure of the CSAR or can make no contribution at all. This survivor's objective was to be the best survivor possible, which starts with motivation and training. The initial SERE training and periodic life support and refresher cannot provide the step-by-step solutions to very survival and evasion and CSAR situation. There are just too many possibilities and there are too many combinations but if that training and preparation is taken seriously and paid attention to the motivation part on the individual's part provides a tremendous foundation of skills, considerations and equipment familiarity. It gives an experience of how to think and what to do, even if it was 21-years ago. And integrated and well-rehearsed Search and Rescue capability is such an important part of our wartime capability and day-to-day peacetime service.

This is A1C (Airman First Class) Bart Ramsey. I had just jumped off the C-130 on the ramp at Aviano. This was the Crew Chief for tail number 806. I'd just like to point out that I think this is the ultimate in professionalism. Such a salute, such a welcoming home and I didn't even bring back his jet.

Yeah, I will point out someone else here because I'm going to talk about her a little bit later. A1C Kristina Foley, just to the right of Bart, was our Intel Specialist; fantastic professional, again, responsible for so many things that came in very, very handy that night.

Two powerful sources of determination for me; calling on my own ferocious sense of duty and service, internal will and drive- what we all as passionate patriots and citizens share in common. We all have that. First, the knowledge that I was CSAR objective and with strong consideration of the dynamics in this particular and unique circumstance I knew they were depending on me and if I didn't survive and evade and do everything possible to not compromise their safety and their mission I knew the objective would not

be met, a powerful source of determination for me to keep that perspective in mind. And the other source of determination was, as I've already mentioned, an immediate understanding of what was at stake, if the objective was not met, if the survivor was captured. You may recall CNN and the Serbian villagers dancing on the wreckage of the F-117. The downing of an F-117 was highly significant to the former Republic of Yugoslavia but Vega-31 would've been the ultimate prize. Allowing the Serbs to have a senior officer F-117 pilot to parade around in front of the world like a trophy would've changed the whole feeling, the whole attitude, the whole complexion for everyone. Imagine the boundless and the vast propaganda and exploitation potential of having a Stealth war fighter. That night the Combat Search and Rescue denied the Serbs what they were so desperate at all costs to have, and in doing so it gave us all pause to reevaluate our individual and organizational levels of preparation and focus and it gave us all and inspiration, an assurance and a comfort that no matter what the risks, no matter how deep if one of our own goes down everything and then some will be done to get him home safe.

That is A1C Katrina Carter. She was my target tier that night. She had planned my target that evening. The night before she had given me an American flag of hers and she wanted me to fly it for her which is not unusual for folks to give us stuff to bring with us in the cockpit to fly on a combat mission. You know, I've had so many people come up to me and say, "Why did you still have that flag? How did you possibly still have that flag?" and I respond very matter of factly, "You know, there was no way I was leaving that flag in the cockpit." I brought it out to the aircraft in my helmet bag. When I got all strapped in, just before I went off to taxi I took that flag out of my helmet bag and I unzipped all my layers and I stuffed it underneath my t-shirt right on top of my heart and that is where it stayed until I spotted her on the ramp at Aviano and I was able to give that back to her. We all knew what was at stake and we all... what it would have meant if I could not bring back that flag. I gave it to Katrina but we, all of us, brought it back for everyone. You all are the reason I was able to bring it back.

I'm going to show a video. This is some raw video that was taken by Air Force News and some other folks on the ramp at Aviano as I jumped off that MC-130. Before I run that I want to thank you again. Thank you for your passion, for service and citizenship. Thank you for your intensity, thank you for your devotion, thank you for your determination, thank you for your passion, for who you are and what you do. This passion is something that we so desperately need so hold on to it very, very tightly and never let it go because at any moment a great deal may be at stake and at any moment a great many may be depending on you.

Let me tell you about the video just so it hopefully will mean a little bit more to you. When we got to Tuzla the helicopter landed maybe 100 yards from the hospital there. I'm pretty sure the folks in that hospital were unaware of what had just happened and what was going on and who we were. Colonel Kemp Plake, Reservist, was the Base Commander. He met me at the helicopter so I jumped off flanked by my two PJs, Pararescuemen I was their pilot and they were not letting me out of their control, as you can imagine. And so Colonel Plake led us into the hospital, we burst in there through

these double doors and I remember shouting in excitement and some screaming. You can imagine what we looked like, me with my floppy hat on and I had all my exposed skin covered with Serbian soil as camo looking very much like an evader and these two guys, you can imagine what they looked like with their helmets and night vision devices and heavily armed. I think it took about ten minutes of convincing them that they needed to check their weapons at the door. Colonel Plake asked me, he said, "Hey, I think you're staying here tonight. What do you want to do? Where do you want to bunk? I can get you a room, you can bunk right here, you can bunk with me in my room? And I said, "You know, all I want to do right now is be with those guys who just yanked me out; where are they going to be, what are they doing? I just want to be with them and share and visit with them." He says, "I don't know, hold on a second." Then he left and about five minutes later he came back and he said, "Hey, I just the word from Aviano; they want you back now." So I had just enough time to use the latrine, freshen up a little bit, get most of the Serbian soil off my face, stuffed all my gear in a big Lawn & Leaf bag, I think it was. Colonel Plake, the Bird Colonel carried that out to the Humvee for me. Stuffed me in his Humvee, out to the ramp, that MC-130, engines running, stuffed in the back, closed the door and off we went to our flight to Aviano. That was somewhat disappointing as you can imagine. Fortunately I have since been able to connect with all those folks which has been wonderful and marvelous. But you'll notice in this homecoming video, after going for a minute or two, you'll notice all of a sudden I get real fixated on my Sandys. "Sandys, where are my Sandys, where are my Sandys?" well the Sandy guys, of course, where the A-10 guys who, for the last half of this whole event, I was in contact with. It was very, very nice and comforting and reassuring. And although I never gave up hope absolutely never gave up hope, honestly, I realistically thought, "I really don't think I'm going to get rescued. I need to be very prepared for capture and anything that happened there." But all of a sudden, on the ramp at Aviano it was very important for me to connect with my Sandys and I didn't want a repeat of Tuzla where all of a sudden I was whisked away again somewhere and I wasn't able to visit with those guys. It turns out they were just finishing their debrief and were on their way out to the ramp because they were stationed at Aviano at the time. And of course, it was tremendous to see everybody else at Aviano as well. You'll see an Air Force News guy following me around with a microphone saying, "How does it feel to be home, how does it feel to be home?" and boy, so much was going through my mind as I heard him sort of, in my peripheral senses, him asking me that and all I could manage to say was, "Beautiful, wonderful and God bless you" but what was going through my mind was, "Boy, that Combat Search and Rescue was beautiful and it is wonderful to be home and God bless everybody for being with me all night."

Crew Chief- the last thing that I would do to sanitize for a combat mission would be to hand my Crew Chief my Line Badge as I was going up the ladder. I remember handing that to Bart and kind of, taking an extra pause that night and saying, "You know, I'm going to need this when I get back." My situational awareness- you might kind of, sense that a little bit. I'm certainly reminded of it when I watch the video. I was still in such a high level of hyper state of vigilance that I didn't want to devote my attention to anyone or anything for more than about two or three seconds because I was still in this evasion

mode, if you will. Everyone out there, it seemed like they were just kind of, stuck, you know, in shock; not believing that I was real or that I was back or that I was okay.

Beer- you'll see me drink a swig of beer. This is significant because I don't drink. But when Lieutenant Colonel Bronco Steward with a fresh tube in his lower lip came up to me and stuck that beer in my face he didn't say anything but that look on his face was, "Now you're going to drink this, aren't you?" you know, your pals, you know, your buddies, they'll take every opportunity and they'll do anything to get you to compromise yourself and I thought to myself, "You know what? If there is one thing I could do right now that would probably mean the most to these fellows it would be to drink a swig of that beer" and I think the cheering and yelling for that was louder than when I got off the airplane.

You'll see the F-16 CJ guys and I'll point them out again a little bit as well.

Okay, let's roll it. I'll try to tell you who some of the other folks are as we're going along.

[video clip]

The target attacks that you see are actual attacks in Desert Storm from the F-117.

[video clip]

That is good. I am a numismatist. In case anybody is scared that means coin collector. I've had this affliction since I was nine. I'm going to tell you statement. Here it is- my favorite coin is the winged liberty cap dime commonly known as the Mercury Dime minted from 1916 to 1945. That statement has great significance related to the Vega-31 event. That was one of my personal statements that we used to precisely, confidently, covertly and repeatedly authenticate during the Vega-31 scenarios and without that ability that CSAR would never have happened. I always carry a Mercury Dime with me, always. Every combat mission I've flown, everywhere I go; I go downtown in blue jeans for dinner and I've got one in my pocket. It was a tradition that I started a long time ago. Why do I? Is this my favorite coin? The years of mintage, first of all, are profoundly significant in world history. 1916, 1945- World War I, World War II. The artistry in the design of the dime itself is just beautiful. The symbolism of this dime, Ms. Liberty, is symbolic of liberty and our love of liberty and freedom. The winged liberty cap is symbolic of freedom of thought. On the reverse that is back for, you know, coin speak. You've got a bundle of sticks bound together that is symbolic of strength which lies in unity. And then at the top of that, on the left, you've got a battle axe symbolic of preparedness to defend. Back around all of that you've got an olive branch, again, symbolic of our love of peace. I had a Mercury Dime with me in my pocket that night and I started the tradition then. I gave that dime to Kristina Foley- A1C, our Intel Specialist, as a small token of my appreciation and thanks and gratitude for her role in that Combat Search and Rescue. I have since continued that tradition and of course, I replenish that dime when I give it away. But then after a while and I've carried a new dime I've kept the tradition of presenting that to somebody or an organization who I think

is just extraordinary in what they do in the contribution that they give and make. So I would like to present the dime that I've been carrying around for a while to General Metcalf and his team at the museum.

General Metcalf: 10¢ not enough for a cup of coffee so I guess I've got to keep it.

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: That is right, that is right.

General Metcalf: Thank you.

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: You bet.

General Metcalf: You know, as you talked tonight I know there are many aspect of this whole mission that you can't talk about but I think they need an appreciation of how close it really was. That for the period of time that you're on the ground a lot of people were very busy to make it work but you might share with them that... how close the bad guys were and had that helicopter had had to go around even, probably wouldn't have worked. So I think they would be very interested in that.

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: Okay, great. And I know we're going to... I'm not sure how we are on time but I know we're going to do questions and answers.

General Metcalf: They haven't left.

Lt. Col. Dale Zelko: Right, okay. I already gave my money away. Very, very early into the event where I was in my initial hole up site which turned out to be where I stayed there were so many thoughts that went through my mind and scenarios that I was playing out in my mind and considering but it ended up throughout that night that really, the best course of action was to stay in my initial hole up site. I landed, as I mentioned, 50 yards west of a fairly well traveled north south running hardball between Ruma and Bujanovac which were about five miles apart, so I was maybe a mile/a mile and a half north of Bujanovac. That was my land site. I was actually very, very successful in crabbing and steering into the wind to get myself to land in an area less bad than other areas that I was being drifted and forced into if I hadn't aggressively steered and crabbed, so I took a lot of actions, very, very aggressively and deliberate actions. Where I came down, again, I was amazed that nobody saw me. I thought, "Most certainly these people just saw this and they're heading for Ruma right now to make a phone call to Belgrade" so I had to get out of that land site very, very quickly. So I secured that... we don't have time tonight for me to tell you all my actions and what was going on. I secured that and made my way to to an initial hole up site that I actually had picked out coming down under canopy which was maybe 200/300-yards from the T-intersection. Within an hour of me being in my hole up site the activity in that whole objective area, it was very obvious that it was search activity. It was a massive manhunt. They energized all army, all military, all police and all villagers in that region to find me at all costs and that was what we were up against. The Combat Search and Rescue, itself, from a CSAR perspective actually took quite a long time. Like I said, it was a little over seven and a half hours from the start of

this whole thing until we were relatively safe and safely exfiltrated and were just about to land at Tuzla. In the CSAR business that is a long time. If that pick up hadn't happened when it did at that exact moment I probably was about fifteen minutes away from capture. It really is a miracle that we pulled that off. As I mentioned already, the human-the operator; simply remarkable. There was search dog activity in the area. I actually had a visitor.

I can tell you about my visitor. It was probably three and a half hours into the event, itself. I was in my hole up site and what I had established for myself was... so I'm in... the hole up site, which I haven't described yet, is a shallow irrigation ditch separating two sections of freshly ploughed farm field running north south. It was just... it was very, very shallow sloping embankments and it was just deep enough that I could squeeze down in there and really crunch down and get my head below the line of sight of the horizon. And I tried to keep that as much as possible, of course, unless I was active such as inventorying my equipment, checking in on the radio, taking tactical peeks to keep my situational awareness up as far as the activity in the objective area, itself. I had my floppy hat on, all camoed up with the Serbian soil and so I thought, "You know what? Right after ejection I switched my whole mindset and attitude from cozy pilot in a cockpit to now I've got to be a high speed covert special ops, special tactics, you know, low signature kind of guy on the ground." And again, I changed my whole attitude towards that; that is how I have to be, absolutely minimizing movement, sound, anything that could compromise my position. So unless I was active with something, which included using the latrine, I decided, "You know what? I should be hugging the eastern slope of this shallow irrigation ditch facing, roughly, north, motionless, kind of spread out. Try not to look like a man shape, head below line of site of the horizon. Fortunately that is the position I was in.