

ROTORS IN THE SAND

**The True Story of What Really Happened to
Cause an Air Force CV-22 Osprey to Crash in
Afghanistan on April 9, 2010**



Official U.S. Air Force photograph from public internet site

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**Osprey Crew in Afghanistan – One Day Prior to Accident:
L-R – Captain Luce, Major Voas, Senior Master Sergeant Lackey
and Staff Sergeant Curtis**

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Official U.S. Air Force photograph from public internet site

This book is dedicated to the families of the four people that did not survive the accident early morning of April 9, 2010 in Afghanistan. The accident report turned into a controversial lightning-rod causing the families to suffer and struggle beyond imagination. My heart goes out to the families affected by the accident.

All profits from book sales will be donated to select veteran organizations to help gold star families.

A special thank you to Lt Col (Retired) Michael Leikam, Victoria Ostrosky and Nan Harvel for their talented editing contributions. They made great sacrifices of time and energy to make this book a reality. I am forever grateful.

**TO THE LIVING WE OWE RESPECT,
BUT TO THE DEAD
WE OWE ONLY THE TRUTH -----Voltaire**

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PROLOGUE

April 9, 2010

Approximate Local Time – Midnight in Afghanistan

Twenty-five hundred feet over Taliban-held territory in southern Afghanistan, three U.S. Air Force CV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft droned through the inky black sky. The mission of the forty-eight U.S. Army Special Forces, Third Battalion, Seventy-Fifth Rangers aboard the airplanes was to engage in direct action with the enemy. The Air Force crews' mission – insert the Army troops close to their objective, a landing zone (LZ) near the town of Qalat in eastern Afghanistan.

Major Randell Voas, a Minnesota native and twenty-year veteran commanding military helicopters, led the three-ship formation on the planned fourteen-minute trip. With a layer of high clouds obscuring the night sky, screens on his instrument panel burned green with aircraft performance and navigation information, the only visible illumination.

In the cockpit, the navigation page revealed their progress – late. Anticipating the descent for landing, Voas adjusted his night vision goggles and keyed the microphone switch on his control column advising his formation of an updated time over target (TOT). The new TOT would have the three CV-22s landing on the LZ at forty minutes after midnight. Approximately twenty miles from the LZ, Voas reduced power, allowing the nose of the aircraft to fall toward the obscured horizon. He trimmed pressure on the control stick to neutral for the gradual letdown to a lower altitude.

At six minutes from touchdown, he passed a required advisory to his crew and passengers. The two aircraft behind him followed his lead and reset the alert height in their radar altimeters to five hundred feet. The Army troops acknowledged, ensured their weapons were

safe, checked that their hand-held GPS tracked normal, and lowered their night vision goggles over their eyes.

Level at six hundred feet above the ground and two minutes out, an A-10 Thunderbolt II orbiting above illuminated (sparkled) the LZ. The crew, expecting a single shaft of light to identify their objective, instead watched multiple rays of infrared energy streak toward the planned touchdown point.

The copilot leaned forward in his seat questioning what he saw.

With no apparent concern, Voas acknowledged and modified his crosscheck, focusing on the TOT and the approach to landing.

At three miles and one minute from landing, the trio of aircraft descended to three hundred feet above the ground. The troops in the rear of the airplane acknowledged the “one-minute” advisory from the CV-22 tail scanner and took a knee facing the open ramp and door, preparing for a rapid egress once on the ground.

Descending into a valley and drifting away from their desired track, the crew noted an unexpected wind shift and corrected their heading to remain on course.

At two and a half miles to landing, Voas slowed to approach speed, and tilted the nacelles on the ends of the CV-22’s stubby wings toward the vertical, altering their configuration from airplane to helicopter mode. The flight engineer lowered the landing gear. Hydraulic fluid compressed to 5000 psi (pounds per square inch) hissed through stainless steel lines to release the up locks fixing the landing gear assemblies into the wheel wells. Giant pistons ported fluid that extended the landing gear into position with an audible clunk.

Suddenly, at one hundred feet above ground, the airplane’s nose unexpectedly pitched earthward in a rapid rate of descent. Unable to arrest the aircraft’s vertical velocity or his speed

over the ground, and with the plane headed for the center of a deep gully, Voas elected to abandon a vertical helicopter landing in favor of a seldom-practiced emergency maneuver. With his speed slightly exceeding ninety knots, he opted to land like any fixed-wing airplane, rolling the wheels onto the desert floor. Nearing touchdown, and amid a cacophony of aural electronic altitude warnings, the tempo of cockpit conversation intensified.

The tail scanner annunciated heights above touchdown beginning at ten feet, but before he could make the six-foot call, the main gear touched down firmly.

The nose wheel rolled a short distance then bounced, causing the open ramp to plow a furrow in the desert sand centered between tracks made by the main gear. Contacting the ground a second time, the nose gear collapsed. The now damaged airplane plowed across the desert, the nose of the CV-22 striking a shallow three-foot-deep ditch. The aircraft pivoted, tail-over-nose, crushing the cockpit, flipping onto its back. As the upside-down airplane skidded to a stop, its proprotors dug into the sand tearing the wings from the fuselage. The engines exploded, igniting fuel pouring from ruptured tanks into the hull and over the ground. The burgeoning inferno trailed the aircraft's deadly path.

The hard points securing the copilot's seat to the floor failed when the cockpit was crushed, sending him tumbling through a hole ripped in the aircraft's skin and across the sand for over thirty yards. He came to rest facing the rear of the fuselage, still strapped in his seat.

The larger section of hull, aft of the cockpit, came to rest inverted facing the direction from which they had landed. With the tail section missing and the fuselage separated at the bulkhead between the flight deck and what remained of the aircraft, the cargo compartment became a hollow tube grotesquely gaping open at each end with severed wires, tubing, and structural supports protruding into the void in a random, disordered tangle.

Shocked and injured passengers disencumbered themselves from their restraints; the less impaired assisting others away from the wreckage as quickly and safely as possible.

At first thought to be dead, the tail scanner remained one of the last brought to safety. His wounds appeared so severe he was left dangling by his safety line from the floor of the cargo compartment. Only when one of the Rangers heard him moaning, was he cut from his restraints and carried away from the aircraft. Thirty yards behind the airplane, another soldier cut the dazed copilot's restraints freeing him from his seat.

Light from the orange flames of burning jet fuel illuminated the dark night. Anticipating a rescue they were sure would soon arrive, the survivors administered first aid and triaged the wounded beneath a cloud of black smoke towering over the wreckage.

The fated Osprey flew only fourteen minutes, from takeoff to impacting the ground - less than a quarter mile short of their point of intended landing. Once on the ground, it skidded over the desert floor for seven seconds, traveling nearly three hundred feet.

Of the sixteen passengers aboard, fourteen, with varying degrees of injuries, survived. The most severe were treated at hospitals in Afghanistan and Germany, the rest at military trauma centers in the United States. Five sustained no or minor injuries, allowing their return to duty once evacuated from the crash site.

Two passengers riding in the back of the airplane died at the scene; one a U.S. Army Ranger, the other, a female civilian imbedded with the unit as an Afghan interpreter.

Two U.S. Air Force members of the crew perished when the Osprey flipped onto its back, crushing the cockpit; the flight deck engineer, Senior Master Sergeant James Lackey, and the pilot, Major Randell Voas.

10 Hours Earlier

After less than a week of deployment at their main operating air base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Major Randell Voas and his crew rose at 2:00 p.m. - dawn for special operator's duty. Expecting to be on alert or fly that night, they ate at the chow hall closest to their quarters then drove their crew vehicle, a Polaris 4-wheeled ATV, a quarter mile over unmarked dirt and gravel roads to their squadron operations. The crew shielded their faces against the mushrooming clouds of choking dust thrown into the air by rough terrain tires on most of the bases' vehicles, and the pungent odor of raw sewage saturating the Kandahar atmosphere.

They entered from the main base side of the semi-permanent building into a large room crews used for flight planning. Once inside, they made straight for a whiteboard where the squadron dispatcher posted general notices and the day's schedule.

Before they could digest the hand-written information, their commander greeted them. "Good, you're here. The Joint Operations Center (JOC) called. They require three aircraft from the Eighth Special Operations Squadron (SOS) to transport members of the Seventy-Fifth Rangers to a landing zone near Qalat ... TOT around midnight. Voas, you're senior in rank and experience. You have mission command and lead. The Planning Operations Center (POC) is drafting the mission plan. They're ready to brief you and the other two pilots when you get there."

Needing no further instructions, Voas's copilot and two enlisted crewmembers departed operations for the flight line and their assigned aircraft. While his crew configured and finished pre-flighting the airplane, Voas headed to the POC.

Before huddling with the two other aircraft commanders in his flight and the mission planners, he checked the weather forecast by calling the base weather shop. With no

meteorological stations or observers in the target area, he relied on a general area forecast for the period – starlit night, light winds, high to mid-level ceilings, typical temperatures for the area and time of year. He had been studying the skies since childhood and could rely on his experienced, albeit primitive, predictions. In spite of the bleak environment, Voas always appreciated an opportunity to fly. He emailed the data to the POC.

Voas and the other two pilots consulted with the imagery analysts to determine a precise landing zone location and coordinated support units providing security and infrared for the landing zone. When they had completed their planning and mission briefing, the pilots loaded into a vehicle and were driven to their respective aircraft.

By the time Voas arrived, maintenance personnel and his crew had removed all non-essential equipment including the cargo compartment seats. The airplane weight had to be minimized to allow for maximum army personnel and fuel required for the mission.

The crew completed operational checks of the aircraft and systems, then proceeded to start both engines. The aircraft first assigned to Voas and his crew earlier in the day had developed mechanical problems that could not be fixed in time to fly. Maintenance substituted another airplane - tail number 06-0031 – to fly the mission. During the preflight, the right engine failed to start normally. The crew discontinued the start, letting the engine cool for a minute. On the second attempt, the engine accelerated to the required speed without any issues. Because this scenario happened periodically, the crew noted the malfunction mentally, and continued to prepare for takeoff.

The mission included a stop at a classified forward operating base (FOB) to on-load forty-eight Rangers. With sixteen Army personnel per aircraft, the three-ship Osprey formation

would then fly a fourteen-minute low level route to insert the special operations team at an infiltration point near their objective along the southeastern border of Afghanistan.

With mission planning and aircraft preflight complete, Voas briefed his crew and prepared for departure. At a prearranged time, the three aircraft started engines, departed Kandahar, and flew a thirty-minute, eighty-mile route to the forward operating base.

After making a vertical approach and landing, the airplanes were shut down to allow the flight engineers to start loading the army personnel. The three aircraft commanders huddled with the ground forces commander, Major Carter, to go over the route of flight and the selected landing zones for each airplane at the infiltration site. A few Rangers complained about having to ride in an airplane to get to a landing zone only fifteen miles from their base. Had they double-timed the fifteen miles, they reasoned, they would have already completed their mission and be hoofing it back. Despite personal preferences or considerations, no one had a choice but to comply with tasking orders.

The soldiers had been loaded into the Ospreys in reverse order they would have to exit after landing. With the seats removed, the soldiers sat on the floor and leaned on their packs to rest against the sidewalls of the cargo compartment. For restraint, they cinched a rope around their waist, securing the opposite end to a line strung along the axis of the fuselage. With the last soldier in place, the three aircraft started their engines and quickly prepared for takeoff.

Due to the altitude of the forward operating base (over 4,000 feet elevation) the weight of each aircraft, and the absence of a prepared runway to provide a clear area to accelerate and climb, the three aircraft performed an *80 Jump** departure with the rotors tilted to near vertical

* “80 Jump” Takeoff – A technique used by V-22 pilots to get off the ground in a short distance.

and the engines at maximum power. Because the copilot had no combat experience and little practice performing the maximum weight take off, Voas allowed him the honors.

The copilot advanced the thrust control lever (TCL) to maximum. The powerful Rolls Royce engines gorged on the additional fuel while accelerating to maximum power. The mammoth, thirty-eight-foot-long blades clawed at the near mile-high air sending vibrations shuddering throughout the airframe. The airplane jumped into the air, climbing out at a steep angle, without the landing gear rolling over the ground.

The copilot nervously shook his head and made a quick glance at Voas.

“She feels very heavy.”

“Yeah,” Voas nodded in agreement.

CHAPTER ONE

AIR FORCE ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION PROCESS

Wall, Robert. "CV-22 Crashes in Afghanistan"
Aviation Week, April 9, 2010.

Three U.S. military personnel and a civilian have died in the first crash of a U.S. Air Force Special Operations CV-22 Tiltrotor.

The cause of the accident has not been determined yet according to a statement issued by NATO's International Security Assistance Force, which runs much of the military campaign in Afghanistan.¹

Newnan, Georgia
Friday – April 9, 2010
7:40 a.m.

On the morning of April 9th, I sat down in front of my computer and scanned my new email messages. I had been out of town for four days working my civilian job as a commercial airline captain flying the Boeing 777. I skipped over the few personal emails, focusing instead on the twenty-five or more dealing with my other job – Air National Guard (ANG) advisor to the commander of the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Before tackling

official military communications, news pop-ups with the words *Crash*, *CV-22*, and *Afghanistan* in the *Aviation Week* online newsletter seized my attention.

The post provided few details, so I turned to a cable news network in the middle of their report. My mouth went dry and chills radiated down my arms as I listened to the words every U.S. Air Force commander fears – the loss of a U.S. military airplane with the probable loss of the crew.

When the reports began to repeat the scarce details, I returned to the internet for information. Over the next few hours, I learned survivors had been taken to medical facilities in theater. The aircraft and crew were assigned to the Eighth Special Operations Squadron (SOS) based at Hurlburt Field, Florida, about thirty-five miles east of Pensacola. Since my position as the Air National Guard advisor to the commander of Air Force Special Operations Command kept me at the Florida Panhandle's base often, I was very familiar with the command and the base. Though I most wanted to know the names of the crewmembers involved in the accident, the information would not be available until the next of kin had been notified. I tried to call Major General (two stars) Clay McCutcheon, United States Air Force Reserve Advisor to the AFSOC commander. With no answer on his or any other line at headquarters, I left a message with my executive officer, Captain April Pierce.

Because of the fatalities involved and the loss of an eighty-six-million-dollar airplane, the accident fell into the category of a "Class A" mishap. The commander at Kandahar Air Base (KAB) would have already assembled an Interim Safety Board (ISB) to preserve evidence and conduct preliminary interviews of witnesses. He would pass their findings to a Safety Investigation Board (SIB) that would arrive at Kandahar Air Base within days.

Assigned by the Air Force Special Operations Commander, the Safety Investigation Board would conduct the next level of investigation. That board would grant *privileged* and *confidential* status to persons providing testimony and hold those findings solely for the benefit of the commander with the object of discovering and recommending any immediate action that might prevent another accident. The findings of the safety investigation board are not releasable to anyone except the commander and selected personnel.

The top tier of the accident investigation process, the formal Accident Investigation Board (AIB), would then convene with a general officer as president. Upon completion, their findings and complete detailed report would be released to the public. The AIB's independent investigation would collect and assess their own evidence, as well as non-privileged evidence shared by the SIB. The AIB would interview witnesses and study evidence in order to find the probable cause of the accident, or the contributing factors contributing to cause the accident. The board would also make recommendations about remedial actions to the commander.

Over the weekend, news anchors and organizations (CNN, FOX and MSNBC) polled military and aviation experts about the accident. One-by-one, they offered opinions that ran the spectrum of possibilities. Some offered that the airplane was shot down. Others insisted the CV-22 had a mechanical malfunction causing it to impact the ground unexpectedly. A few pundits even offered that the crew inadvertently hit the ground while flying too low.

Monday morning the identity of the soldiers and airmen killed in the crash were released. I did not recognize any of the names, but I shared every Air Force airmen's anguish for those associated with the accident – the families, survivors, and those at every level in the chain of command. Given the scrutiny and history of horrific accidents spanning nearly three decades

during its development, the media attention for this accident would persist long after the completion of the investigation.

Tuesday morning, three hours before I planned to depart my home and drive to the Atlanta airport, my cell phone rang. I recognized the name and number on the screen. It was the vice commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, Major General Kent Dobrinski.

“Don. It’s probably no secret why I’m calling. Have you been watching the news?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered. “I can’t believe this has happened. I’m heartbroken. Can I help in any way?”

“I’m glad you asked. How soon can you get down here to Hurlburt Field?”

CHAPTER TWO

SEALING THE DEAL

My brief conversation with General Dobrinski included a reference to news concerning the accident and ended with a summons to Hurlburt Field in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. Since further discussion would have no doubt included classified information, we agreed to continue the discussion once I arrived on the base.

As I sorted through the flood of events now requiring my immediate attention, I informed my commercial airline crew scheduling office to remove me from my scheduled trip. I changed into my Air Force utility attire, battle dress uniform (BDUs) and repacked my suitcase for military duty in Florida. I considered my travel options. The six-and-a-half-hour drive from Atlanta to Hurlburt Field would consume most of what remained of the day. If I went to the airport and caught a flight, I could cut that time closer to two hours. I called my executive officer at Air Force Special Operations Command, Captain April Pierce.

She had anticipated my call and after a brief greeting, cut straight to business.

“I have you scheduled on a Delta Airlines flight departing Atlanta at 4 p.m. I’ll pick you up at the Ft. Walton Beach airport with your staff car. I’ve also reserved a room for you at the Visiting Officer’s Quarters (VOQ).”

“That’s great. I’ll make it, if I leave my house within the next half hour,” I said.

I placed several calls postponing or cancelling events scheduled for the following weeks. I threw my bags in the car, then made a personal call to my wife as I drove to the airport. I endured the ensuing silence while she digested what she’d been told about the change in plans.

Six months from my scheduled military retirement, she had to have believed this part of our lives had come to an end. I waited for her first question for which I would have no answer.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked.

“Days at least ... maybe weeks ... I don’t think months. I have no idea what they expect, but I promise to call you later tonight.”

I could feel her disappointment through the phone. Balancing a military and commercial airline career had many challenges – most of them carried as weight on the shoulders of my wife and daughter. I knew they would handle it, as they always did, but that didn’t make it any easier.

I parked at the airport and scurried through the security checkpoint. Arriving at my departure gate, I boarded the flight. As soon as I was seated, I started working on calls, texts, and emails. Before long, the commuter airplane touched down on schedule at the Valparaiso Airport, a facility shared with Eglin Air Force Base. The civilian and military traffic made the airfield one of the busiest airports in the Southeast.

Eglin Air Force Base, a sprawling United States military reservation located roughly fifty miles from Panama City to the east and forty miles to Pensacola to the west, consumed a vast portion of the Panhandle coast of Florida. Numerous special operations units were based in the area, including the headquarters of Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field.

Captain Pierce met me on the street side of the terminal and handed me a chilled bottle of water.

“Welcome back, sir.”

I loaded my bags into the trunk and slid into the passenger seat.

“Thanks, I guess. So, what’s happening at headquarters?” I asked.

“I’m not aware of everything, but it’s been crazy-busy since the accident. Word in the command area is that you’ll be here a while. I reserved your room for a month.”

A month? I had not envisioned being away from home for a month, nor could I guess what I would be asked to do. There had to be senior officers detailed from their duties to manage events triggered by the accident. Perhaps I would backfill a position for someone engaged in one of the investigations. Having been to military and commercial aviation safety courses, I could also serve as liaison with the accident victim’s families, or coordinate headquarters’ staff with investigation teams deployed to the accident site.

Despite traveling in a blue United States Air Force staff car, sentries guarding the main gate checked both of our identification cards and made a cursory inspection of the car’s interior. Since the attack on 9-11, security at every military installation remained on heightened alert. Hurlburt Field, home of the Air Force Special Operations Command, and numerous special operations units, had always been very serious about who had access to the base.

After driving through the main gate, we passed by the Hurlburt Air Park, where static displays of aircraft employed by special operations crews from as far back as the Korean and Vietnam wars, were restored to perfection and gleaming in the Florida sun. Unlike most airplanes on exhibit in parks and museums, these airplanes were not the worn-out old hangar queens relegated to glorified bone yards. Each specimen in the collection had proudly flown in the days prior to being moved, or flown to Hurlburt, for the purpose of being on display. The aircraft stood as silent sentinels reminding passersby of historic milestones of Hurlburt’s contribution to the special operations, air commando mission. With special operations occupying an expanding role in modern warfare, on May 22, 1990, the Air Force designated Air Force

Special Operations Command as one of the ten major air commands. Hurlburt Field boasts state of the art training and operational facilities for conducting worldwide combat operations.

After we passed the airpark, Pierce turned right then made a quick left onto the street leading to the AFSOC headquarters parking lot, stopping at the three-story building's front door.

"I'll park the car in your designated spot, and see you upstairs in a few minutes, sir."

"OK, thank you," I said as I jumped out of the car.

I scanned my ID cards at the headquarters entry door and double-timed up the stairs to the third floor. My heart pounded as I took a deep breath and entered the command suite.

The AFSOC command suite of offices occupied most of the building's third floor. The commander and senior staff occupied space around the perimeter of a large, open outer office separated from the corridor by a glass wall and doors. The workspaces for secretaries and senior administrative personnel sat near the officer they supported. My office stood between the vice commander and my counterpart from the USAF Reserve.

Before the glass doors closed, the commander's secretary greeted me.

"Hello, General Harvel ... it's good to see you again ... and so soon. The vice commander is expecting you. I'll let him know you're here."

Within seconds General Dobrinski, a barrel-chested six-foot figure, appeared in the door and shook my hand. He carried weight which some might seem unusual for his training and previous assignments as an F-16 and F-117 fighter pilot, but I credited his size to a chronic ankle injury which prevented him from a routine of rigorous exercise rather than a senior officer's sedentary existence.

His office included pictures and knickknacks from his numerous Air Force assignments. In the center of the room, between two stuffed chairs, a glass-topped coffee table displayed fifty

or more challenge coins exchanged in military tradition with other senior commanders or gifted as an expression of gratitude or acknowledgement to those exhibiting outstanding performance.

“We’ve assembled the Safety Investigation Board for the CV-22 accident,” he said.

“They’ll depart for Kandahar in a few days.”

His manner had always been forthright; direct without being curt. He seldom engaged in small talk or pleasantries to ease into a subject, going right to the reason for my being summoned.

“Have you attended the Accident Investigation Board (AIB) President training?”

“Yes, sir. I completed the course in 2006.”

“Great, that makes my next question a little easier. Would you be willing to serve as the AIB president for the Osprey accident?”

I had assumed the position would be filled by an officer currently serving on active duty. I expected to be involved in some capacity for sure, but being six months from my planned retirement, I had not considered the commander would choose me to sit as president of the official accident investigation.

“Me, sir? You want me to preside over the accident investigation?”

“You were the boss’s choice. You’re familiar with the Osprey and seem close to the 8th Special Operations Squadron. So, will you do it?”

From the first day as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point, I had been taught to accept orders without question. I considered myself a good officer who acknowledged orders in the affirmative and charged toward the objective, whatever it happened to be. With my mouth dry, unable to swallow, I choked down a gulp of air.

“Yes sir.”

“Excellent,” he said. “You have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to get it done. Clear your schedule for the next six weeks. Will that work for you?”

“I’ll make it work, sir.”

“If you need to bone up on duties of the Accident Investigation Board President, check with the safety office at the First Special Operations Wing (SOW). They’ll get you up to speed. We’ll have the remainder of your board assigned in the next few days. You have any questions?”

“Where will the board conduct its work?”

He confided that two options were being considered, revealing the location of neither. He would decide within a few days.

We sealed the deal with a handshake and a salute. I walked two doors away to my office.

While the regulations regarding aircraft accident investigations printed, I composed a “to do” list. The print job had completed, but I continued to write. When I pushed away from the desk, I had three pages of notes.

I scanned the regulation outlining the duties of the AIB President. In the four years since I had completed the course, I had forgotten about one block of training during the class. I was reminded about it, and how much it bothered me, as I reviewed the Air Force Instructions (AFIs) concerning accident investigations and the duties of the board president.

I suddenly had second thoughts about what I had agreed to do minutes prior and considered walking back to the vice commander’s office.

CHAPTER THREE

NO CHOICE

The one-week Safety and Accident Investigation Board President Course at the Air Force Safety Center, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, had faded into my distant memory. It had been the last course I attended in the Air Force flight safety field. With retirement on the horizon, I had no reason to expect I would have to draw on the experience.

I searched my memory for a loophole in the Air Force Instructions that required the president of the accident board to personally visit the families of the accident victims in their homes once the investigation was completed and the commander of the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) had been briefed. Air Force regulations required the accident board president to deliver a copy of the report to each family of the critically injured and deceased personnel involved in the accident and brief them about the accident findings. The fact that one of the casualties had been a foreign national troubled me. I couldn't recall the course dealing with surviving families of foreign contractors who lived half a world away.

The knot tightening in my stomach eased knowing that AFSOC had assigned representatives from public affairs, the chaplain's office, and 8th Special Operations Squadron personnel dedicated to the support of individual family members in the aftermath of the accident. I would treat them with the same honesty with which I intended to conduct the investigation, whatever the outcome. The command, the mission, the crews, and their loved ones deserved no less.

In the meantime, I had a lot of work to do in preparation for conducting the investigation. I needed a piece of information that Captain Pierce had at her fingertips. There were seven desks

in the main area outside my office, and when I opened my office door, they were empty. I had lost track of time. Everyone had shut off their computers, straightened their desks, and departed. The call to retreat at the flagpole outside the building had passed hours before, as had the sunset. At 8:15 p.m., I remained the only one in the command section. I began cleaning up my desk, making a note to call home as soon as I got settled in my room. I knew if my wife and daughter didn't hear from me soon, they would become worried.

Though the command, and my job, provided an office in the command suite of AFSOC headquarters, my temporary duties in Florida did not justify a permanent residence. During my brief tours of duty, the base provided temporary quarters. On the short drive to the visiting officer quarters (VOQ), I mentally scripted what I thought I could divulge about my part in the accident investigation and still keep my family involved.

Quarters for visiting senior officers mirrored a second tier commercial Residence Inn or a small condominium; not luxurious, but clean and very comfortable. The two-story unit had a sitting area, bath, and kitchen downstairs, with a bedroom and bathroom upstairs.

Before making the call, I raided the familiar honor bar and pantry. After heating up a can of soup and mixing a rum and coke, I called to update my wife and daughter on all the surprising events of the day.

The following morning my alarm awakened me at 6:00 a.m. I slid into my usual day while performing duties at AFSOC, arriving at the office by 7:00 a.m. where I would prepare for the commander's daily "stand-up" briefing at 8:00 a.m.

The meeting followed a standard format prompted by PowerPoint™ slides projected on a screen opposite the commander's end of the long conference table. Members of the Commander's Action Group (CAG), select civilians, junior officers, and a few senior officers,

who often included Captain Pierce, presented the status of assets and missions – a command-wide “how-goes-it” and a projection of activities over the ensuing twenty-four hours. Fourteen members of the senior staff representing the major elements of the command sat in descending order of rank along the two sides of the table. Other officers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and ranking civilians with interests in, or presentations to make, sat in chairs placed along the two long walls of the conference room.

With Lieutenant General (three stars) Charles Becker away from the base on a temporary assignment, General Dobrinski conducted the meeting, starting by introducing me as the president of the accident investigation board for the Osprey accident. If I had harbored any illusion of absolving myself of this assignment without prejudice, he smashed it in one simple, declarative sentence during the morning meeting.

At the conclusion of the briefing, most returned to their work, while a few remained to conduct informal business or engage in small talk. Neither the commander when present, nor the vice in his stead, ever remained beyond the conclusion of the meeting.

When I returned to my office, post-it notes on my desk indicated I had missed six calls in my absence, one from the pilot member assigned to my investigation board. He wanted to meet me as soon as possible. As I reached for the phone, Captain Pierce knocked on my door.

“We’re compiling a checklist of requirements for your deployment to Afghanistan, sir. You need to update your weapons qualification, which is scheduled in thirty minutes. The pilot member of your board requires the refresher course, too. He has called a couple of times and is anxious to meet you,” she said. “Then you have a working lunch with the hospital commander. He will check your records for theater medical requirements, which, I have to tell you, includes an impressive array of immunizations. If you get a minute somewhere in between, stop at the

supply squadron. They'll issue you a mobility bag, and equipment required for deployment to Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan. Sir, you have a busy day ahead of you. As always, let me know if I can help with anything."

Though I had no need to remind her, I did anyway.

"Call me if anything important changes," I said.

I had not qualified with the 9mm pistol for a couple of years, but anticipated no problem with updating my qualification. When I arrived, there were only two people - a Master Sergeant, the instructor - and the pilot member of what would soon be my accident investigation board, Lieutenant Colonel Jeff O'Leary.

O'Leary stood an inch or two shorter than me with a marathon runners build; a definite asset in the cramped cockpit of a helicopter. Like most aviators, he wore the sleeves of his flight suit pushed half way over his forearms with a crew neck t-shirt showing at his neck. Moving with little wasted motion, he smiled and looked me straight in the eyes when we exchanged greetings.

"General Harvel ... Jeff O'Leary ... I'm the pilot member assigned to your board."

"I'm glad you're here before everyone else. We're going to spend a lot of time together during the next couple of months," I said. "Have you served on an accident investigation board before?"

"Yes, sir, the CH-53 accident six years ago."

"You have no idea how happy that makes me. This is my first," I replied.

I turned my attention to the range master.

"Sergeant, we're ready to start when you are, unless we're waiting for the others to join the class?"

“No, sir, just two of you,” he said, as he laid boxes of ammunition and two freshly oiled 9mm pistols in front of us.

We quickly completed the short course. I invited O’Leary to join me for my working lunch meeting with the First Special Operations Wing Medical Group commander. We drove to The Reef, a fast food restaurant a few blocks from AFSOC Headquarters.

While we waited for the flight surgeon, O’Leary and I exchanged pleasantries and talked about our careers. O’Leary had instructed and evaluated pilots in most of the rotorcraft in the United States military arsenal, which included training Afghan pilots how to fly the Russian built MI-17. He also was one of the first active duty U.S. Air Force pilots to have flown the CV-22. When the aircraft underwent flight-testing prior to its acceptance for production and deployment to active units, O’Leary served as an Air Force test pilot for the program.

He appeared shy at first, perhaps intimidated by my rank and the task to which we had been assigned. Being fellow Air Force aviators gave us a lot in common and during our conversation, I discovered he had also graduated from the U.S. Military Academy. I immediately knew we would become very good friends. Besides being a seasoned aviator, he had been schooled in technical aspects of flight. I hadn’t considered it beforehand, but the team might require a numbers guy, a trained engineer and expert in aerodynamics. Dobrinski had chosen well by selecting O’Leary to be on the accident board.

Midway through lunch, the Medical Group commander, Colonel Stuart Lund, arrived with a briefcase packed with papers. Command requirements for individuals deploying to a forward combat area and the near east exceeded general U.S. Air Force or Department of Defense minimums. He provided a detailed record of inoculations, briefings, training, and

computer based tests to be accomplished by all members of the AIB prior to departure. He pledged to make the process as smooth and easy as possible.

Toward the end of our working lunch, I felt my cell phone vibrating continuously in my pocket. Captain Pierce's familiar number showed on the screen.

"General Harvel, she said, "can you come back to headquarters immediately? General Dobrinski wants to speak with you right away."