Task Force 160 in Operation URGENT FURY

by Kenneth Finlayson

The first operational test of the Army’s Special Operations aviation capability came in Operation URGENT FURY, the 1983 rescue of American students on the Caribbean island of Grenada. Formed in the aftermath of the failed 1980 Iranian hostage rescue, Task Force 160 was the result of the Army’s quest to build an aviation unit specifically designed to support special operations. The 101st Airborne Division provided the elements that composed the organization. Originally called Task Force 158 when formed in 1981, the unit was later designated by the Army as the 160th Aviation Battalion and eventually grew to become the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the Night Stalkers.

Companies C and D of the 158th Aviation Battalion of the 101st Aviation Brigade provided the Army’s newest helicopters, the UH-60 Black Hawk. OH-6A Cayuse (referred to as Little Birds in the 160th) came from the 229th Attack Helicopter Battalion and medium lift CH-47 Chinooks came from the 159th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion. All units were headquartered at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Events in the Caribbean initiated the first combat test of TF 160. In less than ninety-six hours, the Task Force would alert, deploy, and conduct combat operations in a hostile environment.

Located 100 miles north of Venezuela, Grenada is the most southerly of the Caribbean island chain known as the Lesser Antilles. Roughly twice the size of the Washington DC metropolitan area (131 square miles), Grenada is a densely populated island with nearly 90,000 inhabitants. It was part of the British Commonwealth, with the Queen represented by a Governor-General. Enrolled in the St. George’s University Medical School on the island were over 600 Americans. The American student population was largely composed of individuals who had not gained entrance into medical schools in the United States and were trying to improve their chances. Their presence was a significant factor when political unrest rocked the island.

On 19 October 1983, a coup led by General Hudson Austin overthrew the government of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. The People’s Revolutionary Army (PRA) replaced Bishop’s Marxist government with a more virulent Marxist regime. The PRA executed Bishop and a number of his top political allies. Austin and a sixteen member Revolutionary Military Council (RMC) swiftly took control of the country. Monitoring the situation on the island, the United States intelligence community was aware of a large number of Cuban military on the island. They were engineers primarily engaged in the construction of a 10,000-foot concrete runway capable of handling heavy military planes. The runway represented an opportunity for the Soviet Union to extend the range of their Tupolev “Bear” reconnaissance aircraft into South America. This upgrade of the island’s landing facilities, coupled with
The mission of the MH-6 Little Bird was to insert combat troops on missions requiring speed and precision.

The powerful UH-60 Black Hawk was relatively new in the Army inventory. URGENT FURY was to prove the toughness of this versatile aircraft.

The C-5 was the largest transport in the Air Force inventory. This aircraft carried the Black Hawks to Barbados.

The Little Birds were flown directly to Grenada aboard the Air Force’s workhorse C-130 Hercules.

Map of Caribbean region showing the flight routes of the C-5s carrying the UH-60s into Barbados and of the C-130s that carried the Little Birds into Grenada.

the uncertainty over the safety of the American medical students on the island, was sufficient for President Ronald Reagan to authorize the use of military force in a non-combatant evacuation operation.

When alerted in the middle of the night on 21 October, Chief Warrant Officer Dave Bramel and the other Task Force 160 UH-60 Black Hawk pilots and crewmembers initially believed that this was another exercise. The crews loaded the nine Black Hawks on the C-5 aircraft at Fort Campbell for transport to Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, and then on to the staging area on Barbados. It quickly became clear to all that this was not a routine exercise. Other elements of the Task Force were also on recall.

On 22 October at Yuma Proving Ground, Arizona, instructor pilot Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jim Dieterich was flying an MH-6 with student pilot Warrant Officer Mike Gwinn in the Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course when they were notified to return immediately to Fort Campbell. On the plane flying back, Dieterich noticed the news headlines about the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon and assumed that this was where they were headed. The two MH-6 Little Bird pilots grabbed their personal equipment at Fort Campbell and caught a flight the next morning to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There they linked up with the other elements of the Task Force.

“When we got to Fort Bragg, there was a distinct sense of urgency,” David Bramel recalled. Bramel and the other pilots went into the mission briefing. “The G-2 (security) guy giving us the intelligence briefing told us that there were ‘no more than six Cubans on the island. You guys will have the people waving at you as you come on shore.’ The mission was to kick the Cubans off Point Salines Airfield. There was no mention of medical students.”

The lack of potential opposition was accentuated when Bramel and the other pilots were issued .38 caliber pistols as side arms. “The guy issuing the weapons gave me six rounds and told me I needed to return them after the mission as it [the ammunition] was all from a single lot and accountable.” On the UH-60s, two pintle-mounted M60 machine guns manned by the aircraft crew chiefs provided the protection for the aircraft. After the mission briefing, the pilots went back to the flight line where they linked up with the special operations troops that would ride in on the helicopters. “Before we left, we all got down and drew some sketches in the dirt to get a basic idea of how we were going to execute this thing,” Bramel thought to himself that it “was just like when I was in Vietnam.”

At Pope Air Force Base, the nine UH-60’s were on the C-5 aircraft of the 436th Military Airlift Wing that picked them up at Fort Campbell for the flight to their destination on the island of Barbados. At the same time, two AH-6 and six MH-6 Little Birds were loading on four C-130s. The C-130s were to fly directly into Point Salines Airfield on the heels of the Ranger parachute assault. The Rangers who would ride the MH-6’s loaded onto the
Map St. George's and surrounding area.

The Black Hawks sustained considerable damage from the intense fire when they tried to insert troops at the prison.

Task Force 160 had three primary objectives in the invasion of the island. The UH-60 aircraft were to insert special operations forces at Richmond Hill Prison; at the Governor's mansion to rescue Sir Paul Scoon, the Governor-General; and at the island's radio and television broadcasting station at Beausejour. The MH-6s would insert the Rangers at secondary targets in the city of St. George's. The original mission called for the insertions to occur at 0100 on the 25th, five hours after leaving Pope Air Force Base, to take full advantage of the darkness and TF 160 pilot expertise in flying with night vision goggles. Delays with the Air Force aircraft, chaotic pre-mission planning, and inter-service staff inefficiencies caused the time schedule to unravel. The three C-5s landed on Barbados between 0250 and 0330 and despite an all-out effort by TF 160 to get the UH-60s built-up and ready to go, the helicopters did not depart until 0530, as daylight was spreading over Barbados.  

By the time the helicopters lifted off on the 45-minute flight to Grenada, the invasion by conventional forces was underway; the special operations forces would not catch the enemy by surprise. As the aircraft raced toward Grenada, the pilots tuned in to the local radio station where, to their dismay, they heard the announcer telling the local populace to get their weapons and shoot down the American helicopters that were approaching. Despite a prohibition against test firing the weapons on the run in to the targets, the pilots immediately had their crews fire their M60s in preparation. They discovered that the ammunition for the machine guns was regular link instead of the required mini-gun ammunition, which caused the weapons to jam. As the nine aircraft neared the island, five Black Hawks headed for Richmond Hill Prison initially followed by the two aircraft assigned to carry troops to the Governor's mansion. These two then broke off short of the prison and headed for the Governor's mansion. The remaining two Black Hawks headed toward the radio station as the flight came onto the island. Richmond Hill Prison represented a formidable target. Perched on a high ridge that ran like a spine north and south a kilometer above the capital city of St. George's, the prison boasted walls twenty feet high, topped with barbed wire and watchtowers. There were no landing zones on the narrow, twisting ridge and the intent was to insert the special operations troops using the fast roping technique pioneered by TF 160. The intelligence report was that the prison was serving as the headquarters for General Austen's RMC and likely to be well guarded. To make matters worse, 500 meters to the east and 150 meters above the prison loomed Fort Frederick, headquarters for the People's Revolutionary Army. The positioning of the two compounds caused the helicopters to fly through a gauntlet of fire. As the flight of Black Hawks in trail rounded a large hill and began their approach, they came under withering fire from troops in and around the prison. All helicopters sustained damage with virtually every crewmember being wounded.

"They were ready for us," Bramel recounted. "We stabilized to fast rope, but never did execute. I looked down to my right and there was a Cuban guard with an AK-47 and he was just ripping my aircraft apart. . . . We were there for about five seconds, maybe ten seconds, and I said 'Don't go, don't go.' We went back around and, I'm not sure if we got this from the ground commander, but we went back in. They had more people waiting for us this time. We went back to the same spot and the same guard is there hammering my aircraft." Bramel took a round in the leg that knocked his foot from the pedal. Major Larry Sloan, the company commander, was in
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The AC-130 Spectre gunship provided tremendous firepower in support of the ground troops on the island.

The AH-6 is the attack version of the Little Bird and can be configured with a variety of weapons systems.

The C-130s landed on Point Salines Airfield and the Little Birds were unloaded.

The Beausejour radio and TV station. The pilots had no difficulty identifying the target that was set a few hundred meters up from the beach. The troops exited the aircraft and dashed in to secure the building. Holding the building proved difficult. The team encountered heavy resistance throughout the day, and eventually was driven off the site by an armored personnel carrier. They abandoned the transmitter building and worked their way down to the beach, where after dark they swam back to the destroyer USS Caron. The two Black Hawks returned to Point Salines and remained with the other six on the island as night fell.

At the airfield, the Rangers methodically expanded their holdings and steadily pushed the PRA back. The Black Hawks waited out the rest of the night at Point Salines. The next day they were joined by the Little Birds, the other task force element heretofore not engaged.

On the 25th of October, two AH-6 and six MH-6 Little Birds were unloaded from the four C-130s at Point Salines near the Air Terminal. Prior training sessions with the Rangers on build-up procedures paid off as the Little Birds were quickly made combat ready. The Black Hawk pilots warned their Little Bird counterparts of the hostile environment over the city. The Little Birds’ first mission was short-lived. As the two AH-6 aircraft crested the hills above Point Salines and headed out over the bay, they encountered intense fire and quickly returned to the airfield. Fully alert, they used a different approach route and subsequently provided very effective suppressive fires during the recovery of the men and equipment from the downed Black Hawk on Amber Belair Hill. The volume of fire encountered by the AH-6’s over the city caused the Ranger insertion mission by MH-6’s to be cancelled.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Dietderich and the MH-6 teams displaced from the airfield apron where they had off-loaded, and moved their helicopters and the Rangers to a more protected position in a draw at the far end of the airstrip. One MH-6 was damaged in the maneuver when the tail rotor hit on the uneven ground. With their pre-planned mission scrubbed, the MH-6 Little Birds remained on the airfield as the Rangers and then the newly arrived troops of the 82nd Airborne Division expanded the perimeter around Point Salines. Two of the AH-6 crew chiefs, Sergeant Steven R. Nelson and Sergeant David L. Godsey, hot-wired a bulldozer on the airfield and built a berm to store the AH-6 ammunition. The Little Birds remained in place until the next day when they assisted the medical personnel of the 82nd by evacuating wounded from the airstrip.

On the morning of 26 October, the second day of operations, the MH-6 pilots responded to the 82nd’s request for evacuation of several wounded soldiers. The pilots loaded up the wounded and flew them out to the USS Guam. “The Guam was supposed to be our support ship, but we didn’t know where it was and we did not have the proper frequencies to talk to the Navy,” recalled Jim Dietderich. “Once the Guam moved in and we could see it, we flew out there and off-loaded the wounded. We hadn’t trained on the protocols for landing on a carrier and to me it looked like a long floating runway, so I came in from the rear and just set down in the middle of the deck.” The five MH-6s made three round-trips before they were pulled off the mission to reload their helicopters aboard two C-141s for a flight back to the United States. The five MH-6s also received the word that they were return to Barbados.

In the afternoon of 26 October, the Black Hawk pilots were told to fly back to Barbados that night. Five of the aircraft were badly damaged and required extensive repairs. They did receive one replacement rotor blade via a C-130 to replace one severely damaged over the prison. By parking a hot-wired steamroller alongside the aircraft, they were able to get the blade installed that afternoon. Despite the battle damage to the helicopters and low fuel levels, particularly in Bramel and Chief Warrant Officer 4 Marc Moller’s aircraft, the flight of eight Black Hawks left that night for Barbados. Unescorted by safety aircraft, the flight had no self-recovery capability. With damaged instrumentation and little in the way of functioning navigation systems, the flight followed a rough azimuth until they saw the glow of the lights of Barbados. Bramel’s aircraft crossed over the shore on the verge of running out
Chief Warrant Officer 4 James Dietderich and Warrant Officer Mike Gwinn made three round trips to the USS Guam ferrying wounded out to the ship. Jim Dietderich is employed as the USASOC Safety Officer.

of fuel. He quickly looked for a suitable landing spot. As the aircraft came to a hover, one engine flamed out, and as the helicopter settled down, the second engine died.30 Later, they loaded the aircraft on C-5s and returned to Fort Campbell.

For Task Force 160, Operation URGENT FURY validated the training programs that produced the most experienced professional pilots and crews to survive in the hostile environment over Grenada. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry H. Shelton, described the Night Stalkers: “Throughout the short history of the 160th, its aviators have pioneered night flight tactics and techniques, led the development of new equipment and procedures, met the call to duty wherever it sounded, and earned a reputation for excellence and valor that is second to none.”31

Endnotes
5 Chief Warrant Officer Four (Retired) James Dietderich, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 7 April 2006, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
6 Chief Warrant Officer Four (Retired) David Bramel, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 24 January 2006, Fort Campbell, KY, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
7 Bramel interview.
8 Bramel interview.
9 Bramel interview.
11 Chief Warrant Officer Four (Retired) James Dietderich, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 5 May 2006, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
13 Bramel interview.
14 Bramel interview.
15 Adkins, Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada, 186.
16 Bramel interview.
17 Bramel interview.
18 Bramel interview.
19 Adkins, Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada, 190.
20 Bramel interview.
21 Bramel interview.
22 Adkins, Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada, 184.
24 Bramel interview.
25 Dietderich interview, 7 April 2006.
26 Dietderich interview, 7 April 2006.
27 Dietderich interview, 7 April 2006.
28 Dietderich interview, 5 May 2006.
29 Bramel interview.
30 Bramel interview.