



What to know about the daring rescue of two U.S. aviators shot down in Iran

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The United States pulled off a daring rescue of two aviators whose fighter jet was shot down by Iran, plucking the pilot from behind enemy lines before setting off a complicated extraction of the second service member who hid deep in the mountains as Tehran called for Iranians to help capture him.

The CIA looked to throw off Iran's government before the crew member was found, launching a deception campaign to spread word inside the Islamic Republic that it had already located him.

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Even as President Donald Trump and other U.S. officials described an almost cinematic mission, rescuers faced major obstacles, including two Black Hawk helicopters coming under fire and problems with two transport planes that forced the U.S. military to blow them up.

"This is the first time in military memory that two U.S. Pilots have been rescued, separately, deep in Enemy Territory," Trump wrote early Sunday on his Truth Social platform. "WE WILL NEVER LEAVE AN AMERICAN WARFIGHTER BEHIND!"

U.S. officials stayed silent as the operation played out

In a pair of social media posts, Trump said the operation over the weekend required the U.S. to remain completely silent to avoid jeopardizing the effort, even as the president and top members of his administration continuously monitored the airman's location.

The White House and the Pentagon refused to publicly discuss details about the downed fighter jet for well over 24 hours after the initial crash, particularly about the first crew member rescued from the F-15E Strike Eagle— an effort that Trump later said took seven hours in broad daylight over Iran.

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Iran urged the public to look for the 'enemy pilot'

Meanwhile, an anchor on a channel affiliated with Iranian state television had been urging residents in the mountainous region of southwest Iran where the fighter jet went down to hand over any "enemy pilot" to police and promised a reward for anyone who did.

Trump said the American aviator was being "hunted down" by enemies who were "getting closer and closer by the hour." The United States was monitoring his location continuously, he said.

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At the right moment, Trump said, he directed the military to send dozens of heavily armed aircraft to rescue the crew member, who the president said is "seriously wounded" but will recover.

Iranian state media reported that airstrikes in southwestern Iran on Saturday killed at least three people and wounded others, in the same area where the missing American crew member was believed to be.

American rescuers face obstacles with aircraft during the operation

The American rescue mission ran into major challenges behind enemy lines. Iran's joint military command claimed it struck two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters taking part in the operation.

A person familiar with the situation said the two helicopters were able to navigate to safe airspace, although it's unclear if they landed or if crew members were injured. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive information.

Then, the U.S. military was forced to bring in additional aircraft to complete the rescue of the second service member due to a technical malfunction, according to a regional intelligence official briefed on the mission. The U.S. blew up two transport planes it was forced to leave behind because of the mishap, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the covert mission.

READ MORE: AP report: U.S. launches rescue operation after Iranian state TV claims fighter jet went down

Iran's state television on Sunday aired a video showing what it claimed were parts of a U.S. aircraft shot down by Iranian forces, along with a photo of thick, black smoke rising. The broadcaster said Iran had shot down a transport plane and two helicopters that were part of the rescue operation.

Iran's joint military command said the destroyed aircraft included two C-130 military transport aircraft and two Black Hawk helicopters in the province of Isfahan, where the rescue took place.

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An additional U.S. pilot was rescued but details were not available given the security concerns, another person familiar with the situation said.

Neither provided more information, including whether it was the A-10.

Kim and Lee reported from Washington, and Magdy from Cairo. Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Konstantin Toropin in Washington, Farnoush Amiri in New York and Julia Frankel in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

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By — Matthew Lee, Associated Press

By — Samy Magdy, Associated Press

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