



Inside the daring mission to rescue a U.S. airman downed in Iran

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The United States scrambled a massive clandestine and fighting force to rescue a weapons systems officer who had to eject from his fighter jet over central Iran last week, eventually sending more than 150 aircraft to beat Iranian forces in the race to find the Air Force colonel, sources familiar with the situation told CBS News.

U.S. forces fired 339 munitions over 50 hours of operations.

The weapons officer survived nearly two days behind enemy lines, sheltering in a rocky mountain crevice, multiple officials familiar with the rescue said.

The recovery of the downed colonel unfolded against the backdrop of escalating tensions between Washington and Tehran over the Strait of Hormuz, a critical channel for global oil trade. President Trump halted other planned U.S. military operations against Iran, redirecting attention and resources in a herculean U.S. government effort toward locating and extracting the stranded American service member, sources told CBS News.

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Here's the timeline leading up to the crash and the rescue, based on conversations with multiple officials familiar with the search and rescue mission.

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Click on each location in the region of Iran where a U.S. F-15E was shot down and rescue operations took place to see more details and imagery about events verified via photos, videos and other sources by CBS News.

Showing a low-resolution version of the map. Make sure your browser supports WebGL to see the full version.



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Mr. Trump was not seen in public on Thursday, when the nation's attention had turned largely to the unfolding drama at the Justice Department, as he fired Attorney General Pam Bondi. The president also celebrated a planning board's approval of his plans for a new ballroom at the White House.

Behind the scenes though, Mr. Trump and his core national security team huddled at the White House, preparing for additional U.S. military operations against Iran.

On Truth Social, the president said Iran had not yet seen the full might of the U.S. military and threatened further attacks. "Bridges next, then Electric Power Plants!" he wrote.

So far, the war had been an air campaign. No known American ground forces had entered Iran.

Just before 10 p.m. ET, the F-15E Strike Eagle, referred to by the call sign Dude 44,

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reconnaissance. Five rescue aircraft also took to the sky.

Warplanes, taking on enemy incoming, fired at Iranian convoys to block their advance toward the officer.

The downed pilot, call sign Dude 44A, was saved within hours. He sustained serious injuries, and there was a time shortly after he ejected when Trump officials were worried he would not survive.

An HH-60 helicopter in the convoy ferrying the pilot to safety was damaged by small arms fire, injuring crew members on board. It ultimately landed safely in friendly territory. The pilot of another damaged aircraft, an A-10 Thunderbolt II, or Warthog for short, was forced to eject over the Persian Gulf and was rescued.

The F-15 weapons system officer, separated from his crewmate by blowing winds, was somewhere deep inside enemy territory, armed with a handgun, an encrypted communication device and a location beacon. He suffered non-life-threatening inju

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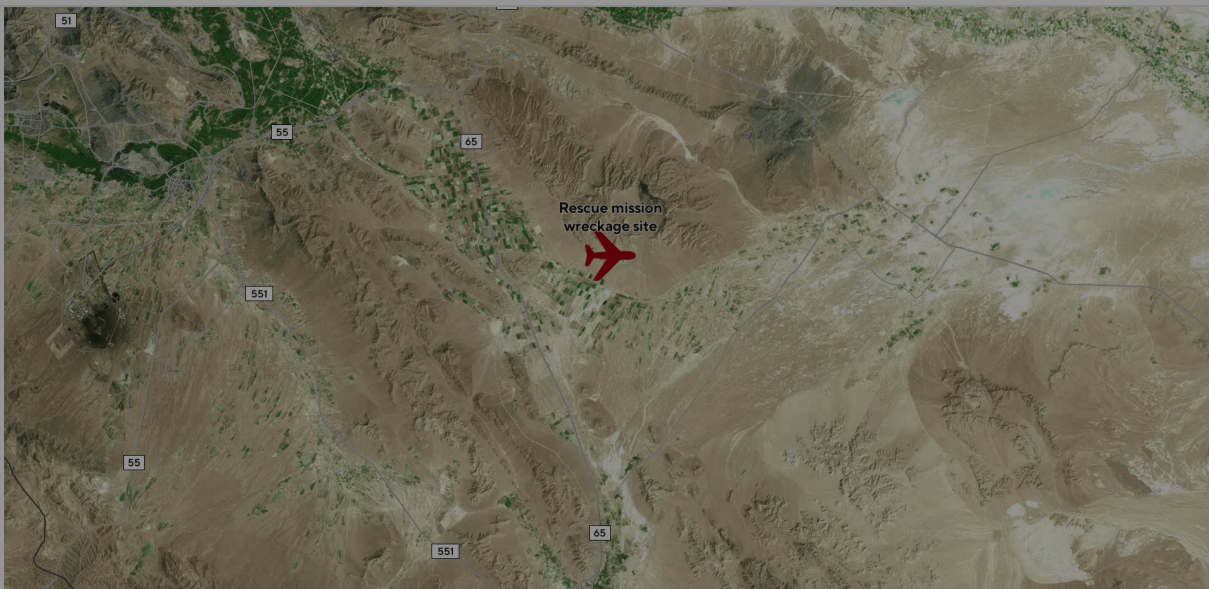
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The F-15E was shot down in a mountainous region of southwest Iran, where the airman survived nearly two days behind enemy lines. This map shows the general region of the country where the rescue activity was concentrated as well as the approximate location of photographed wreckage from rescue aircraft. Credit: CBS News research and visual verification

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The team could communicate with the colonel, so they asked him a question about his father that only he would know. The answer was correct. His identity was authenticated.

U.S. intelligence had learned the Iranians had dogs sniff the F-15E's ejection seats that were on the ground. This alarmed the president's team, but it turned out the dogs weren't effective at tracking the scent.

A sunny Saturday in Washington with highs in the 80s would normally be a golf day for the president. But a Marine sentry was spotted outside the West Wing most of the day, usually a sign the president is at work. The president's communications director confirmed "he has been working nonstop in the White House and Oval Office," an indication of focus on the rescue mission.

Hegseth phoned in regular updates to the president.

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aircraft.

Some of the air assets were used as decoys to confuse Iranian defense forces about the colonel's location.

U.S. intelligence showed Iran was searching at night, too, using smaller drones, but its forces lacked sophisticated night-vision capabilities.

None of the intelligence hinted that the Iranian forces knew where the airman was – in a mountainous area south of Isfahan. At least half of Iran's nuclear stockpile is believed to be stored at a facility nearby.

The plan was to land the fixed-wing aircraft on the agricultural runway, secure the area, offload the helicopter in pieces from the MC-130s, and re-assemble them, which would take about 15 minutes. Aviators would fly the Little Bird MH-6 helicopters the seven minutes to the ridgeline where the weapons system officer was located, and fly back another seven minutes to the landing strip.

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Mr. Trump's national security inner circle followed the developments from Washington, some sitting hunched over or pacing. In the worst of the stress, little was said.

After Hegseth greenlit the second rescue operation, he read aloud from Exodus 33:21.

"Then the Lord said, 'There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.'"

Rough terrain on the mountain meant the Little Birds couldn't land at the top. The weapons systems officer was asked to descend to another area lower down the cliff.

Delta Force kept watch over the rudimentary airfield. Tactical drones and strike aircraft

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The four Little Birds returned to the airstrip. There was no fire fight during this rescue, unlike the earlier mission to save the pilot.

But the two MC-130 transport planes were bogged down in the loose soil, unable to take off. Operators on the ground usually do a soil sample to determine whether the runway would support the weight of the aircraft, but there was no time to do so before this operation.

The bigger, heavier planes had been necessary to fit the helicopters.

The Pentagon executed its backup options, developed in case the makeshift runway was too soft, and sent in lighter CASA CN-235 220s.

The president was reluctant to leave behind any military hardware. Hegseth told him there was no other option if they wanted to get the Americans out safely. Mr. Trump acquiesced, telling Hegseth that if the planes and helicopters had to be sacrificed, to make sure there was nothing left.

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"We did. We had great talent," he added at a press briefing Monday. "We had a little luck, too, I would say."

"To Dude 44, welcome home," General Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the briefing. "Job well done."

Credits

Reporting by **James LaPorta, Jennifer Jacobs, Eleanor Watson, Olivia Gazis, Charlie D'Agata, Matt Gutman, Rhona Tarrant, Maddie Kornfeld, Layla Ferris** and **Emma Li**. Design and development by **Grace Manthey** and **John Kelly**. Editing by **Arden Farhi, Jordan Freiman** and **Jamie Reysen**.



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