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Paul Johnson led the rescue team to a downed F-14 pilot just as Iraqi forces were moving in.

The memoirs of many pilots begin with the moving moment when they first saw an airplane and determined they would become a pilot. Not so for Paul T. Johnson, who grew up in the rural South with his sights set not on enemy aircraft—but on becoming a successful farmer.

In 1980, Johnson earned an agriculture degree from Murray State University in Kentucky, launching a farming career focused primarily on row crops and cattle.

The farming vocation proved to be relatively short-lived, but Johnson wouldn't join the Air Force for five years after graduating from college.

Six years after that, Captain Johnson was in Saudi Arabia, flying from King Fahd Royal Airport to King Khalid Military City Airport to sit on alert and wait for a search and rescue mission. Johnson would soon earn an Air Force Cross for his role in a Desert Storm rescue operation. It was an A-10 mission of unprecedented length and

depth into Iraqi territory, and it ended with the successful rescue of an F-14 Tomcat pilot who had been shot down deep behind enemy lines.

That day, Jan. 21, 1991, started out in typical fashion. After being kept on a weather hold, Johnson launched on the flight from Fahd to Khalid as Sandy 57, with Capt. Randy Goff as his wingman in Sandy 58.

Deep Into Iraq

An hour into the flight, and just 10 minutes before they were to land at KKMC, they were given a combat search and rescue task. An F-14, call sign Slate 46, was down.

Johnson received a very tentative set of coordinates, call signs for a KC-10 tanker and the MH-53 Pave Low rescue helicopter, and headed west. He took on fuel from the tanker, and checked in with the E-3 AWACS, which promptly vectored him to investigate a suspected Scud missile site.

At this time of the war, the threat of Scuds was extreme. There was widespread concern that Saddam Hussein

would goad Israel into attacking Iraq through Scud attacks. Such an Israeli attack could have splintered the coalition, which included numerous Arab nations, attempting to free Kuwait.

Johnson found the suspected site and confirmed it did not harbor Scuds. He refueled again, contacted the AWACS, and was redispached to the original set of coordinates.

Much of the equipment in use during Desert Storm would have been familiar to the earlier generation of pilots who had flown in Vietnam.

Johnson had to track down the downed pilot using coordinates given to him (and later determined to be incorrect) by the Automatic Direction Finder. The ADF was, to say the least, imprecise. Johnson flew east and picked up a radio signal from the pilot, but the ADF needle refused to turn. He flew back west, and then swung to the north, where the voice signal grew louder. Johnson was soon farther into Iraq than any A-10 had ever been, west of al Asad Air Base—some 60 miles north of the coordinates he had first been given.

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By Walter J. Boyne

Eventually the ADF needle swung around. The downed Navy pilot, Lt. Devon Jones, and his radar intercept officer, Lt. Lawrence R. Slade, had ejected after their F-14 was hit by a surface-to-air missile. Jones had been transmitting to rescue coordinators, but there was no contact with Slade.

Flying below the clouds at about 300 feet, Johnson flew directly over Jones, but couldn't see him, as he was well-camouflaged in a hole he dug with his survival knife in the barren terrain. Johnson memorized the terrain scene and dropped a mark point into his inertial guidance system—which itself had drifted considerably in the five hours of flight.

By this time, there were two Pave Low helicopters, an AWACS, a KC-10, and a flight of F-15 Eagles all on the CSAR channel. Suddenly the mission had become a vintage Vietnam-style CSAR effort, with everyone talking nearly nonstop. The voice traffic soon reached a point where Johnson had

A surface-to-air missile took down the F-14 Tomcat (like the one shown below during Operation Desert Storm) with Navy pilot Lt. Devon Jones and Lt. Lawrence Slade, a radar intercept officer, on board. They ejected into hostile territory, deep inside Iraq.



USAF photo



In this photo taken from the door of an MH-53 Pave Low, Navy Lt. Devon Jones runs toward pararescueman Sgt. Ben Pennington during the rescue effort.

to assert himself, demanding that all voice communication cease except for the survivor, the A-10s, and the Pave Lows.

The Pave Lows were using their ADF gear as well, but were too low to pick up the signal. This left Johnson with a knotty problem: He could provide the coordinates he was reading out from his inertial system—but because of the characteristic drift of the system, he knew that they were not the correct coordinates. The Pave Lows would then attempt to home in on a bogus location.

Johnson was also beyond “bingo fuel”—lacking the amount needed to safely return home—and had to personally violate the first rule of CSAR by

leaving the survivor behind. Johnson told Slate 46 to stay put, turned south toward the KC-10 tanker (which had itself flown 25 miles into hostile Iraqi territory at 15,000 feet), and topped up his fuel.

Johnson immediately returned to the search area, rendezvousing with Capt. Thomas J. Trask and copilot Maj. Michael Homan in Moccasin 05, a Pave Low. He led him back to the area where Jones was still hiding out and again got the ADF needle to swing, pointing out where the aviator was.

The Americans were not the only people using ADF to pick up Jones’ signal. Across the desert, kicking up a cloud of dust, came an Iraqi truck.

Johnson asked Jones if he saw the vehicle.

“The truck is headed straight for me,” Jones replied.

Slopping Hogs to Flying Hogs

How did Johnson go from farmer to A-10 pilot? Much of the credit goes to his neighbor, Elliot Lambert, who was an Air National Guard lieutenant colonel.

Lambert, who had once flown Boeing KC-97s and Douglas C-124s, believed the Air Force would be a good career choice for young Paul Johnson, and steered him toward it.

Johnson liked agriculture, but was nonetheless attracted to two possible new careers. One option was acting on Lambert’s advice and joining the Air Force. The other was following in his father’s footsteps and becoming a youth minister.

In 1985, Johnson entered the Air Force.

He first went to Hondo, Tex., to participate in the flight screening program, where he flew the T-41 Mescalero (a military variant of the Cessna C-172). This was enough to convince Johnson he wanted to become a pilot.

Next he was sent to Officer Training School at Lackland AFB, Tex. Johnson was four weeks into the program when his father died. Attending to the funeral

Johnson and Goff used their 30 mm cannons to destroy the Iraqi military truck that was moving in on Jones. A-10s, such as this one, had never been so far into Iraq.



and to family affairs interrupted his program, and he was washed back a class.

While he disclaims being a natural pilot, Johnson proved to be a very good one.

Now a brigadier general and commander of the 451st Air Expeditionary Wing at Kandahar, Afghanistan, Johnson entered pilot training at the age of 27. He was within four months of being too old to be eligible for flight training.

After earning his pilot's wings, Johnson was sent to Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., to fly the A-10 Warthog. In his own words, he had made a transition from "slopping hogs to flying hogs."

The assignment came at a time when the Air Force was considering retiring the A-10, but Johnson made the most of it. On being transferred to his first operational unit, the 353rd Tactical Fighter Squadron at Myrtle Beach AFB, S.C., he assumed a number of duties that would help prepare him for combat. He became an instructor pilot and eventually served as both squadron safety officer and squadron weapons officer.

Then, in August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait.

The 353rd was tasked to go to Saudi Arabia, and all of the aircraft were prepared and standing by. The deployment was delayed, however, because planners were unable to establish an adequate "tanker bridge" for the trip to the sandbox.

When at last the whistle blew, squadron commander Lt. Col. Richard D. Shatzel gave the news that the 353rd was going to beddown at the King Fahd airport in Saudi Arabia.

After the briefing, Shatzel asked Johnson to follow him down the hallway to his office. There, Shatzel closed the door, and told Johnson he would not be accompanying the squadron to Saudi Arabia. Instead, Johnson was being assigned as a student at USAF's Fighter Weapons School at Nellis AFB, Nev.

The assignment had been on the books for some time, but Johnson desperately wanted to go into combat first. Shatzel told him not to worry—there would undoubtedly be delays overseas before combat started, and in this he proved to be correct.

Johnson now recalls fuming during the four-day drive from South Carolina to Nevada, frustrated at seemingly being denied the chance to go to war for the United States.

He walked into an extremely difficult environment at the weapons school. The sentiment for retiring the A-10



Airmen examine Johnson's A-10, mangled on a later mission over Iraq. He managed to refuel in flight and wrestle his Hog back to base in Saudi Arabia.

had gained strength, and the school's instructors were frozen in their jobs, with no replacements assigned. They were anticipating the disbanding of the program.

Reflecting back, Johnson cannot call his time at the weapons school fun, but it was extremely challenging. Each day ended with a profoundly candid assessment of the students' skills in a manner jokingly described as having three primary attributes: fear, sarcasm, and ridicule. Johnson says these critiques of his and the other A-10 pilots' skills were necessarily blunt, and actually reflected the seriousness and professionalism of the instructors.

Johnson saw his experience at Nellis as a matter of attitude. Graduates had to be both skilled and approachable, on the ground and in the air, so that younger pilots would later come to their weapons officers with confidence when problems needed solving.

Far North, But Not Too Far

On the night he received his weapons school diploma, Johnson also received an envelope from Col. Henry Hayden, 354th Tactical Fighter Wing director of operations. Inside was a letter saying, "Congratulations, we know you've done well, now get over here posthaste."

Two weeks later, Johnson was with the 353rd TFS in Saudi Arabia. There he found little turnover, and as Shatzel had predicted, the unit had not yet seen combat.

Johnson felt a little diffident when he was immediately assigned the job

of squadron weapons officer, replacing Capt. Stephen R. Phillis.

Phillis later became the 353rd's only casualty, shot down Feb. 15, while flying a search and rescue combat air patrol attempting to retrieve another downed pilot.

The early days in Saudi Arabia were filled with tedium, not excitement. The 353rd's A-10s were tasked to prepare for combat search and rescue missions in two locations. One was at King Fahd, while the other was KKMC.

Most in the 353rd, including Johnson, would have preferred being assigned to combat sorties. This was especially the case during the first four days of Desert Storm, when all the American aircraft that were shot down were in areas far too dangerous for a rescue attempt or where the downed airmen were immediately captured.

On the day of his rescue, the Tomcat pilot Jones might have also been considered too far north, but now the A-10s were there, watching as the Iraqi military truck bore down on him.

Johnson still had not spotted the well-camouflaged survivor, but got him to describe the truck's relative position so that the Warthogs could take it out. Johnson and Goff then attacked the truck, turning low above the ground. The A-10s missed on the first pass, but turned sharply and came back.

"I rolled in and finished it on my second pass," Johnson told William L. Smallwood for the book *Warthog*, shortly after the war. "That truck was down there burning, orange flames



The A-10 flown by Johnson on the rescue mission is on static display at the National Museum of the US Air Force, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.



USAF Brig. Gen. Paul Johnson greets Afghanistan Air Force Brig. Gen. Mohammed Yousef at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, in September 2010. Johnson is now commander of the 451st Air Expeditionary Wing at Kandahar.

and black smoke pouring out of it, and the [rescue helicopter] comes in and lands. Then, just 100 yards away from the burning truck, this guy jumps up out of his hole and runs to the helo."

The job not yet done, Johnson refueled for the fourth time that day and flew escort on the Pave Low until he was released to return to King Fahd. On the day of the pilot's rescue, Johnson logged eight hours and 45 minutes of combat flight time. Trask and his MH-53 crew later received the Mackay Trophy for their role in the rescue.

Jones, who had been flying with VF-103, the "Jolly Rogers," went quickly back to his ship, USS *Saratoga*.

His radar officer, Slade, on the other hand, was captured about four hours after he had ejected and appeared on Iraqi television with two other coalition prisoners on Jan. 25. Slade was finally

released as part of a group with five other POWs on March 3.

Johnson earned the Air Force Cross for his role coordinating Jones' rescue, but his excitement in Iraq was not over. Only a few days later, on another combat sortie, Johnson was hit by enemy fire while trying to attack a SAM site in poor weather. His A-10 was hit on egress, after he had concluded—five minutes too late by his estimation—that he would not be able to take out his target.

"I looked out the cockpit to the right and got a cold chill," he told Smallwood after the war. "I could see hydraulic lines sticking up out of the

right wing, a little bit of flame over the top of the wing, and a big gaping hole in the leading edge with some of the top wing skin gone. ... It was an ugly sight." The right landing gear's housing was shot away, and the right engine had ingested some of the debris, spit it back out, and kept running.

The explosion had destroyed one of his two hydraulic systems, and Johnson was still loaded up with live ordnance. He managed to bring the damaged Hog 12 miles back to Saudi Arabian airspace, and then refueled the battered A-10 in flight. With a fresh load of fuel, he pressed on to KKMC, still 50 miles distant.

Johnson's next worry was whether or not the wing would stay attached when he lowered the landing gear. He had no way of knowing how extensive the damage was, and was concerned that the additional drag of the extended gear would overstress the wing.

Fortunately, the gear went down without incident. Johnson flew a no-flap approach and made a smooth landing, even though a tire, almost certainly damaged by the flak, shredded upon touchdown.

After these two highly eventful sorties, the rest of the Gulf War for Johnson was not quite as dramatic. His Hog was repaired in theater, and he flew it home under its own power after the war. ■

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