



# Book Review

## Rebirth into New Domains

### A Review of *Phoenix Rising: From the Ashes of Desert One to the Rebirth of U.S. Special Operations*

By Major Sydney M. Haanpaa

*Given the nature of operations, the object of planning is not to eliminate uncertainty but to develop a framework for action in the middle of it.<sup>1</sup>*

## Rebirth into Multiple and All-Domain Operations

Keith Nightingale's *Phoenix Rising*<sup>2</sup> is a compelling account of the planning, training, and execution of Operation Eagle Claw. As the deputy operations officer of the Joint Task Force (JTF), Nightingale provides a first-hand account of the operation through personal journal entries. *Phoenix Rising* then transitions to an opinionated, linear account of the institutional barriers and biases that subsequently undermined the full effectiveness and utilization of Special Operations Forces (SOF) up until Operation Neptune Spear against Osama Bin Laden in 2011. Nightingale proffers that although Operation Eagle Claw was ultimately unsuccessful in rescuing the Iranian hostages, the "disaster of Desert One worked as the catalyst" that enabled the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command, the ultimate success of Operation Neptune Spear, and the "rise of SOF as a valued part of the defense establishment."<sup>3</sup>

Upfront, Nightingale clearly articulates that the diary entries reflect his in-the-moment perception of issues and individuals.<sup>4</sup> Filled with pithy and satirical commentary, his entries are honest, unapologetic, and refreshingly relatable for anyone who has served as a junior staff officer. For example, he aptly describes how observers in a small meeting room line the wall, "all eagerly leaning forward to be included in the deliberating of the almighty" while musing that their "primary contribution is to raise the carbon dioxide level."<sup>5</sup> On another occasion, he recalls the staff taking bets on how long it would take before an unprofessional cup on the briefing table is noticed, musing, "Do people of such rank and position have a sense of humor? (Later, yes it was noticed, empirical evidence indicates that a sense of humor was not present)."<sup>6</sup> Moreso, his reflections highlight the intangible importance of creativity, resourcefulness, and dedication when it comes to solving novel, complex, and dynamic issues.

Prospective readers should not turn to *Phoenix Rising* for an objective or linear account of Operation Eagle Claw. Instead, military readers should critically evaluate Nightingale's conclusions<sup>7</sup> as significantly influenced by the thematic frustrations that

he experienced as the deputy operations officer. Therefore, this review will draw from both Nightingale's subjective reflections and the Special Operations Review Group's *Rescue Mission Report (Holloway Report)* to highlight two critical concepts of joint operations: command and control (C2) and interagency coordination. As multi-domain<sup>8</sup> and joint all-domain<sup>9</sup> operations become a strategic priority for the Department of Defense, Nightingale's account is an example for judge advocates (JAs) of how C2 and interagency coordination can either frustrate or reinforce mission success. In turn, JAs will be able to identify unknown risks, forecast the associated impact, and appropriately advise in a dynamic, multi-domain or joint all-domain environment.

## "Get Your C2 Right Up-Front"<sup>10</sup>

Understanding a command structure or the nature of the command's relationship to other commands is impactful in all stages of an operation, from planning to execution. As a joint function, the concept of C2 encompasses the operation of a joint force, the exercise of authority over subordinate forces, and a means for allocating resources and managing risk.<sup>11</sup> It is also an element of joint planning that is usually identified as part of the operational design and refined for each course of action developed in the planning process.<sup>12</sup>

Aptly titled "In the Beginning,"<sup>13</sup> Nightingale's first entry draws the audience into the conception of Operation Eagle Claw. The requirement is simply stated: "to rescue the hostages in Iran."<sup>14</sup> Nightingale asserts that there was no available capability to action the requirement. Specifically, the Joint Chiefs of Staff "concluded it had in reality no capabilities other than nuclear weapons or mass conventional forces, neither of which were rational tools to respond."<sup>15</sup> Then-Army Chief of Staff, General Edward Meyer, issued the initial planning guidance: "We need a specialized force for a reasonable chance to free our hostages."<sup>16</sup> The scope and understated complexity of the Joint Chiefs' intent was refined by the JTF planners, "Fly 15,000 miles around the world, the last 850 miles in hostile airspace, and arrive undetected . . . Free, without injury, 60+ American

citizens from their guards without injury to any civilians . . . .<sup>17</sup> The planners then identified the forces and capabilities in their operational approach, outlined the course of action, and memorialized their work in “the Book.”<sup>18</sup> While Nightingale recalls that “the Book” annotated each critical commander decision point, it is unclear if the concept ever included an outline of the JTF’s command structure or the supporting/supported relationships between other command elements.<sup>19</sup>

The palpable tension between components rears its head as the JTF shifts into exercising the plan with the identified mobility assets and ground forces. The training is the first time that the individual elements would “confirm their planning assumptions and coalesce to work out joint issues.”<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the helicopters aboard the USS *Nimitz* were directed to stress the equipment to determine the assets’ limitations and expose risks.<sup>21</sup> Despite such direction, the JTF commander is informed that the *Nimitz* commander did not comply with training profiles.<sup>22</sup> Although the JTF elevated the issue to the Joint Chairman and the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Command was directed to comply, the JTF was prohibited from visiting the ship to validate the training. Subsequently, when the mission launched, none of the helicopters had flown more than ninety minutes.<sup>23</sup> As highlighted by Nightingale, the mechanical issues encountered during mission execution would have been identified with the proper training.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, a clearly defined command relationship would have also reinforced the JTF mission as a priority.

Interestingly, Nightingale never reflects on how a defined C2 within the planning and training phase of the operation could have reduced friction. Although Nightingale dismisses the conclusions of the *Holloway Report* because its outcome was “pre-ordained and lacked real integrity,”<sup>25</sup> the report does fairly identify C2 as an issue. Specifically, the *Holloway Report* determined that C2 relationships beneath the JTF commander were “not clearly emphasized” and became “tenuous and fragile at intermediate levels.”<sup>26</sup> The report further discusses how the lack of clear command relationships

impacted the planning, training, and execution phases of the operation.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, *Phoenix Rising* serves as a cautionary tale for any JA serving on a joint staff or in a unit involved in multi-domain operations. In a focus paper on C2 in a joint environment, the Joint Staff J7 notes that “form follows function” when crafting a task organization.<sup>28</sup> Rather than relying on established task organizations, flexible and adaptable C2 is created when the organization takes into account how the “logical battlespace geometry” aligns with a concept of an operation.<sup>29</sup> Instead of defining C2 upfront to ensure “unity of command of the force and unity of effort with partners,” Nightingale’s account assumes that the very existence of the JTF inherently created relationships with other commands.<sup>30</sup> Just as Nightingale’s JTF planned a rescue mission “before ‘Joint,’ Nunn-Cohen, and Goldwater-Nichols were on the books,”<sup>31</sup> multi-domain and joint all-domain operations will likely present nuanced and novel questions about C2 structures.<sup>32</sup>

### **“I Thought We Were on the Same Team”<sup>33</sup>**

Although *Phoenix Rising* broadly showcases the importance of interagency cooperation for joint operations, a critical reader will recognize the delicate nuances involved in unified action. Current joint doctrine provides a suggested framework for planners, but application requires that a practitioner consider the following, at a minimum: What is the overall U.S. Government strategy? What are the missions of specific agencies, and how will that drive their perspective on success? What external factors shape that agency or organization’s interpretation of the strategy?<sup>34</sup>

Specifically, *Phoenix Rising* includes two vignettes to consider: the Department of State’s complete lack of cooperation and the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) tenuous cooperation. From the beginning of Operation Eagle Claw, planners struggled with the lack of intelligence on the exact location of the hostages.<sup>35</sup> This critical information requirement lingered as an outstanding question throughout the majority of the planning, training, and execution of the operation.<sup>36</sup> Although it was generally known that the hostages

were being detained at the U.S. embassy, the absence of a precise location within the twenty-seven acre complex or details on the internal structure of the embassy buildings increased the risk and lowered the probability of operational success.<sup>37</sup>

Nightingale recalls how attempts to liaise with the Department of State were abruptly terminated after two weeks of initial cooperation due to the increasingly “hostile” and “uncooperative” nature of the State employees.<sup>38</sup> He questioned the lack of cooperation, musing, “I thought we were on the same team . . . . It’s their employees who are hostages, and we (the military) are working to bring them back.”<sup>39</sup>

While at face value, the frustration is reasonable, it is based on a flawed assumption that the Department of State shared his perspective, specifically, that the military was the best method to achieve the strategic goal of freeing the hostages. In reality, the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, was a staunch supporter of negotiation and diplomacy as the most successful means of resolving the hostage crisis.<sup>40</sup> Thus, as the JTF was being established in mid-November 1979, the Department of State was working on diplomatic resolution through negotiations with Iranian foreign ministers and prioritizing diplomatic sanctions over military solutions.<sup>41</sup> While Nightingale conjectures that the Department of State’s non-participation was a result of either personalities or “historic antipathy toward ‘things military,’” a more interesting analysis would be a reflection of how the diverging priorities could have been enjoined under a unified line of effort.<sup>42</sup>

Nightingale’s account also identifies the CIA as an uncooperative stakeholder. The CIA was initially invited to the table because “[it] was a true joint interdepartmental effort” and the agency was the proponent of the best possible intelligence.<sup>43</sup> Yet, Nightingale described meetings with the Agency men as “the longest-running non-conversation in the same language ever held in this building,” and generally unproductive.<sup>44</sup> He theorized that the lack of information was compounded by the intelligence community’s competing desire to retain the integrity of their assets.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, he believed the lack of cooperation was influenced by the prevailing belief

that the military operation would never be approved.<sup>46</sup> Although Nightingale's astute perception is actually reinforced in the CIA director's recollection of the crisis,<sup>47</sup> he fails to consider the extent to which the JTF's organization impeded interorganizational cooperation. Although intentionally limited to a review of the Department of Defense, the *Holloway Report* identified that the lack of external "centralized and integrated intelligence support" and the urgency of planning requirements resulted in fragmented and undeveloped intelligence.<sup>48</sup> The *Holloway Report* also proffers that an inter-agency Intelligence Task Force would have resolved this issue by creating a centralized authority to supervise and coordinate the various intelligence activities.<sup>49</sup> While not prescriptive, current joint doctrine also underscores the importance of centralized interorganizational cooperation within a joint force command.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

*Phoenix Rising* offers a rare, unfiltered perspective on Operation Eagle Claw. Although the book's discussion of the special operations enterprise culminates with the successful Operation Neptune Spear, it also serves as an example of important considerations as the Department of Defense shifts focus to multi-domain and joint all-domain operations. In multi-domain operations, there will likely be uncertainty about who owns C2 over the operation and the supporting or supported organizations. Multi-domain and joint all-domain operations will also likely involve personnel from a variety of entities beyond the joint force. Understanding the nuances and complexities that Nightingale faced during the planning and execution of Operation Eagle Claw will only better inform JAs' perspectives as the military paradigm undergoes another transformation. **TAL**

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*MAJ Haanpaa is a student in the 73d Graduate Degree Program at The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School in Charlottesville, Virginia.*

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## Notes

1. U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 5-0, PLANNING AND ORDERS PRODUCTION para. 1-3 (04 Nov. 2024).

2. KEITH M. NIGHTINGALE, PHOENIX RISING: FROM THE ASHES OF DESERT ONE TO THE REBIRTH OF U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS (2020).

3. *Id.* at 281.

4. *Id.* at xiii.

5. *Id.* at 5.

6. *Id.*

7. Compare *id.* at 182 (concluding that five obstacles prevented the success of the operation, specifically: most service principals were not willing to commit resources and risk beyond what was required; there was minimal sharing of personnel and assets or assumption of responsibility from senior officers; the JTF was constrained by operational security concerns and the lack of a budget; senior civilian leadership priorities were not reflected in the support for the JTF's endeavors; the "start-stop of the program throughout its existence marred credibility and attracted a non-supporting attitude"), with SPECIAL OPERATIONS REV. GRP., JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, RESCUE MISSION REPORT 60 (1980) [hereinafter HOLLOWAY REPORT], <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB63/doc8.pdf> (concluding that "the ad hoc nature of the organization and planning is related to most of the major issues and underlies the [report's] conclusions" and that a specific operational security plan based on "selective disclosure rather than minimum disclosure" would have better enabled the JTF).

8. See ANDREW FEICKERT, CONG. RSCH. SERV., IF11409, DEFENSE PRIMER: ARMY MULTI-DOMAIN OPERATIONS (MDO) (2024), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11409/10>.

9. See U.S. DEP'T OF DEF., SUMMARY OF THE JOINT ALL-DOMAIN COMMAND & CONTROL (JADC2) STRATEGY 2 (2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/mar/17/2002958406/-1/-1/1/summary-of-the-joint-all-domain-command-and-control-strategy.pdf>.

10. DEPLOYABLE TRAINING DIV., JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JTF C2 AND ORGANIZATION 4 (2d ed. 2020) [hereinafter J7 FOCUS PAPER].

11. See JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JOINT PUB. 3-0, JOINT CAMPAIGNS AND OPERATIONS, at III-1 (18 June 2022).

12. See JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JOINT PUB. 5-0, JOINT PLANNING, at IV-19 (1 Dec. 2020) (C1, 1 July 2024).

13. NIGHTINGALE, *supra* note 2, at 2.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 15.

18. *Id.* at 19.

19. See *id.*

20. *Id.* at 91.

21. *Id.* at 122.

22. *Id.* at 184.

23. *Id.* at 185.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 191.

26. HOLLOWAY REPORT, *supra* note 7, at V.

27. *Id.* at 15-17.

28. J7 FOCUS PAPER, *supra* note 10, at 4.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.* at 1.

31. NIGHTINGALE, *supra* note 2, at 187.

32. See MIRANDA PRIEBE ET AL., RAND CORP., MULTIPLE DILEMMAS FOR THE JOINT FORCE: JOINT ALL-DOMAIN COMMAND AND CONTROL 1 (2020), [www.rand.org/t/RRR381-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRR381-1) (examining how all-domain operations necessitate experimentation with alternative C2 structures).

33. NIGHTINGALE, *supra* note 2, at 26.

34. See JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JOINT PUB. 3-08, INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COOPERATION, at I-5 (12 Oct. 2016) [hereinafter JOINT PUB. 3-08].

35. NIGHTINGALE, *supra* note 2, at 25.

36. See *id.* at 25, 81.

37. See *id.* at 81.

38. *Id.* at 26; see also *id.* at 188 ("State was opposed to any rescue attempt and would not cooperate out of principle.").

39. *Id.* at 26.

40. See MARK BOWDEN, GUESTS OF THE AYATOLLAH: THE IRAN HOSTAGE CRISIS: THE FIRST BATTLE IN AMERICA'S WAR WITH MILITANT ISLAM 169-174 (2007) (ebook); *The Iranian Hostage Crisis*, OFF. OF THE HISTORIAN, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/iraniancrises> (last visited Apr. 25, 2025).

41. See Betty Glad, *Personality, Political and Group Process Variables in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Jimmy Carter's Handling of the Iranian Hostage Crisis*, 10 INT'L POL. SCI. REV. 35, 37-50 (1989) (explaining how the initial American response was a "dual track strategy" that prioritized negotiations and sanctions and specifically outlining Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's main concerns with military action).

42. NIGHTINGALE, *supra* note 2, at 188-89.

43. *Id.* at 24-25.

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.* at 27.

46. *Id.* at 183. Such organizational apprehension did not occur in Operation Neptune Spear. See Siobhan Gorman & Julian E. Barnes, *Spy, Military Ties Aided bin Laden Raid*, WALL ST. J. (May 23, 2011), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704083904576334160172068344.html> (highlighting the cooperation between the CIA and the military forces, "reflect new-found trust between two traditionally wary groups").

47. See Albert F. Eldridge, *Spymasters Warning*, 48 BULL. OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS 43, 43 (1992) (detailing that Stanfield Turner acknowledged that the CIA did not always provide effective intelligence).

48. HOLLOWAY REPORT, *supra* note 7, at 20.

49. *Id.*

50. JOINT PUB. 3-08, *supra* note 34, at II-31 ("[A] decentralized approach makes internal synchronization of the staff's activity more difficult. It incurs the highest risk of functional stovepiping and a disjointed or duplicative effort with external entities.").