

Bill Andrews was on the ground in the Iraqi desert with a broken leg, about to be captured. His warning calls saved his wingman from also getting shot down.



Call From the Desert

By Peter Grier

Air Force Capt. William F. Andrews could not stand up to surrender because the two long bones of his right leg were broken at the top of his boot. He raised his hands to try to get the Iraqi soldiers coming at him to stop shooting.

It worked.

The Iraqis crept forward with AK-47s raised and motioned at Andrews to rise. He motioned that he couldn't. They were cautious and moved in

slowly. When they were about 30 feet away, Andrews saw in the distance a puff of smoke and a white missile trail. An Iraqi air defense unit was firing at an F-16 circling overhead. Andrews knew the F-16 was his wingman trying to save him. It was Feb. 27, 1991. Ten minutes earlier, Andrews had been flying back to base, then was hit by an Iraqi surface-to-air missile. His airplane exploded in flames, and he was pinned against the canopy by negative Gs. He

had a second to grab the ejection lever, knowing he was dead if he missed.

Now he was prone in the sand, his leg a mess, his F-16 wreckage. He did not want another US pilot to join him. "I'm thinking, 'I'm in a world of hurt, I don't want any company, I've got to do something,'" he recalled in a recent interview. With the Iraqi guns trained on him, Andrews grabbed for his radio.

It took maybe two seconds for Andrews to pull his hands down, grab his



USAF photo



survival radio, and yell, “Break right, flare, flare, flare!” The F-16 overhead broke right. Flares came tumbling out.

“I was stupid right; I was crazy,” said Andrews. “These guys had guns trained on me from 30 feet away. But I just knew I had to do something.”

The Iraqi soldiers pulled their triggers and ran. Bullets hit all around Andrews. He threw the radio down—he thinks that he said, “They’re attacking me!” as he did so—and surrendered again. The soldiers swept up to and around him, still shooting. They shot everything: his radio, his helmet, his survival kit, and raft.

Andrews does not know why he didn’t get shot, or how many aircraft heard his call. Broadcast on an emergency frequency, every US pilot for 50 miles might have heard it and decided to break right and drop flares.

The Iraqis were scared to death. They grabbed him, threw him in a jeep, and dumped him off at their headquarters. Then more Iraqis took him to the next headquarters up. Several soldiers started to beat him, but their officers told them to

Left: An F-16 like the one Andrews flew over Iraq. Right: An F-16 with AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles takes off on a mission during Operation Desert Storm.



USAF photo



F-16s are refueled by KC-135 tankers during the second day of Desert Storm, Andrews' first day of combat.

stop. The officer in charge—a regiment or division commander—was older, in his mid-40s.

For a moment, he and Andrews locked eyes. Andrews realized then that he had to make a decision about how he was going to act. “What was I going to do from then on? Was I going to be defiant? Was I going to be submissive? Was I going to be neutral? How was I going to comport myself?” Andrews said.

As a boy, he always wanted to fly. The place he wanted to fly, however, was outer space because he was a child of the space race. He checked out every book about space from the local library, and then every book about the Air Force—noting most astronauts had a military background. “You can look at all those records, and my library card was on all those [books] 10 times over,” Andrews said in a 2008 oral history interview for Virginia Military Institute.

In high school, he paid for private flying lessons, spending all the \$500 in his bank account earned from delivering papers. In 11th grade, he applied for the Air Force Academy and got in in 1976. Andrews was so eager to begin that he skipped his high school graduation to travel to Colorado Springs, Colo., because training for cadets started the next day.

Andrews graduated from the academy in 1980. He and many of his

classmates were “crazy into flying,” he recalled. The first solo flight in a jet aircraft in undergraduate pilot training was (and still is) a big deal. The student would fly around the pattern several times with an instructor, until the instructor said to pull over in front of the tower and let him out, said Andrews.

Constant Carrot

He flunked a few rides but had few difficulties learning to fly. After he finished UPT, they kept him around as a T-37 instructor pilot for three-and-a-half years. He found teaching others an enjoyable dimension to flight. But he also wanted to be the person with his hands on the controls, not the one in the other seat with his arms folded. “For me, right, I was just revving my motor. I wanted to get going to Tactical Air Command,” he said.

He racked up flight hours, but career advancement was competitive. To get into fighters, you had to be at the top of the corps of instructors, none of whom were slouches.

One day in the mid-1980s, Andrews' squadron commander came up to him and said, “I got your assignment.” It was EF-111s. Andrews asked the commander if that meant he was going into TAC. The commander assured him he was. “I wasn't sure, because [EF-111s] didn't shoot or bomb,” said Andrews.

The T-37 was a tiny airplane; the EF-111 was not, a 43-ton swing-wing Cadillac stuffed with jamming equipment.

It was enjoyable to fly, and Andrews got to fly it a lot. The mid- to late-1980s were the time of the Reagan-era flying renaissance. Flight hours climbed. New airplanes flowed in. Training became more demanding and realistic, and readiness rates climbed.

EF-111s were in great demand. Over four years piloting the aircraft, Andrews participated in 11 Red Flag deployments. “That really tweaks your flying skills,” he said. But what he wanted was a single-seat fighter.

Andrews' wing got one F-16 transfer assignment every year. They called it “constant carrot”—waving the lure of a fighter spot in front of everybody so they keep hustling.

Four years in, Andrews caught the carrot. He'd been in the Air Force about eight years and was at that point a mid- to high-level captain. Andrews was thrilled. He'd seen lots of the F-16s and thought they were the coolest of Air Force aircraft. Ultimately he would fly F-16s from 1988 to 2002.

Andrews' first operational F-16 assignment was in West Germany. It was 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell. Flying levels were still very high, and airspace was crowded. There were some 17 fighter wings from various nations stationed in a country then about the size of Oregon. “It was just a wonderful, exciting place to be,” said Andrews. It was also dangerous. He lost a neighbor to a midair collision.

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the Air Force's

focus switched from Central Europe to the Middle East.

In September, as the end of the fiscal year neared, the flying schedule began to shut down, so Andrews and his fellow pilots could not fly more to prepare for what looked like coming combat. Andrews, by then a flight commander, told his eight pilots they wouldn't be in the air for several weeks, but should use the time to study Iraqi defenses, think about tactics for desert fighting, and prepare their families for a long deployment.

Andrews' unit—the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron—was tapped for Desert Shield. The 10th TFS joined two squadrons from Shaw AFB, S.C., as part of the 363rd Tactical Fighter Wing. Both Andrews' unit and the Shaw units flew Block 25 F-16Cs and were based at Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, about 550 miles southeast of Kuwait.

His first combat took place on the second day of Desert Storm, the bombing target an Iraqi air base. The weather was bad, so Andrews had to identify the target with radar.

The real wake-up call came on his third mission. He and his wingmen were out in west Iraq on a Scud hunt. An SA-2 anti-aircraft missile site came up and started shooting. Andrews, heading away from it, looked back and saw a missile coming for him at Mach 3. The SA-2 has been described as a flying telephone pole, but what Andrews saw was smoke, a lengthy flame, and a black dart in front, moving incredibly fast. It tracked underneath him before its motor burned out. "It left me speechless for a couple of seconds," he said.

A few weeks later, he flew one of his defining missions, providing close air support for US Special Forces trapped behind Iraqi lines. An intense mission, he and his fellow airmen knew if they did their job right, eight Americans would survive. If they did poorly, they would be killed—either by Iraqis or inaccurately aimed US cluster bombs. The fighters circled over the top of the good guys for 20 minutes and dropped bomb after bomb.

They hit exactly where the forward air controllers wanted. After the sun went down, a rescue helicopter extracted the Special Forces team.

The day he was shot down, as he locked eyes with his captor, the Iraqi commander, Andrews knew he could behave in a number of ways. He had



Getty Images photo by Dirk Halsead

Andrews (on crutches) and other POWs arrive back in the States at Andrews AFB, Md. He was a prisoner of the Iraqis for five days.

a pantheon of Air Force heroes to guide him.

"I had this menu in my head of what airmen had done in the past," said Andrews. He thought of World War I ace Frank Luke, who shot at his captors; Lance Sijan, who evaded the North Vietnamese for 46 days; and Bud Day, the F-100 pilot who refused to cooperate through nearly six years of captivity. "I mean, we have these people who have gone before us, and their stories serve as something incredible to aspire to and a way to model our own behavior, ... and I knew their stories resided in my heart because I guess from the minute my parachute opened, I could see that the endgame was going to be a test of my integrity in an interrogation room," he said.

Escape From Death

Andrews decided, staring at his captors, that he would try to not react to anything they did. He was not going to help them in any way. Perhaps an opportunity to escape would present itself.

Later that night, the Iraqis decided to drive him into Basra and turn him over to intelligence personnel. They proceeded down a dark highway in a jeep—Andrews, a driver, a lieutenant, and a guard who kept his AK-47 pressed against Andrews' head.

The engine kept stalling. The driver would get out, fiddle around under the hood, pronounce things fixed to the lieutenant, and off they would go.

Finally the engine stalled for perhaps the 10th time. The driver hit the brakes and started to get out. The moment his boot hit the pave-

ment, bombs from a CBU-87 went off right in front, sweeping across the road—looking like incredible copper and gold sparklers accompanied by a roar sounding like a chain saw going off in Andrews' ear.

Andrews knew right away what had happened. Overhead an unseen Block 40 F-16 had locked up the jeep in ground-moving target track. The fire control computer had calculated a perfect lead point for a vehicle moving at 40 mph. During the 30 or 35 seconds it took for the released munitions to fall, the jeep engine coughed and stopped. The bombs exploded where the jeep should have been.

Everyone froze, then the driver piled back in and the jeep veered off into the desert, circling back.

That night, they ended up back where they'd started.

Having survived a cluster bomb attack by a fellow airman, Andrews got dragged into an Iraqi Republican Guard bunker, a 12-by-12-foot dugout. The Iraqis gave him some food, splinted his leg with bamboo, and they all went to sleep. In the middle of the night, Andrews awoke to hear Iraqis running around like crazy and yelling.

They dragged Andrews out and set him next to their vehicle as they packed. But they were clearly tired of hauling him around—Andrews weighed about 200 pounds, and the individual Iraqis weighed about 130. They appeared to figure the pilot was no threat to them, so they quit watching.

So he crawled away. Andrews hid underneath a piece of canvas in the now-empty bunker. He heard a lot of yelling. Eventually the Iraqis drove off.



Bill Andrews is greeted by his son, Sean, at Andrews Air Force Base after his release.

He had escaped. “And then I thought, ‘OK, genius, you’ve got a broken leg in the middle of the desert. What are you going to do now?’” he recounted.

He came up with a plan. He needed water. If he found it, he could just sit and wait for the US Army to sweep over him. He knew he was in no-man’s land because all night he had heard rockets and US artillery booming overhead, heading in the direction in which his Republican Guard captors had fled. He fashioned a white flag from a piece of cloth.

But his freedom was brief. The next day, the Iraqis re-entered the area, searching for deserters, he thought. They looked under all the debris they’d left behind and they found him.

This time his captors made it to Basra without incident. Iraqi medical personnel in a hospital splinted his leg in a more professional manner then sent him off to Baghdad, where Andrews knew full well he faced an interrogation.

To ship their captive pilot to Baghdad, the Iraqis in Basra put him on a bus, which stopped to pick up some other passengers. Andrews was blindfolded, but he peeked under the cloth and could see flashes of US uniforms. The guards warned him not to talk, but he felt he had to tell the others who he was.

He got his chance when a guard opened a window and cold air started blowing on him. “Captain William Andrews with a request, sir. The wind is cold. Will you close the window, please?” he said out loud. That way he got out his rank and name. The Iraqi grunted and shut the window. “The Air Force thanks you,” Andrews said.

A Cold Wind

Andrews heard, from behind, someone mutter, “Airborne.” He later discovered he had been seated in front of Sgt. Troy Dunlap, a pathfinder

from the 101st Airborne Division, who had been on a helicopter with a search and rescue team diverted to try and find Andrews when he was shot down. Two others from the helicopter also were on the bus, one of them Maj. Rhonda Cornum, an Army flight surgeon. Tragically, the helicopter did not survive the environment that also destroyed Andrews’ F-16. It had been shot down; Dunlap and the other survivors were injured and five of the crew were killed. “It’s one of the hardest things, to know that other people died trying to save you,” says Andrews today.

At intelligence headquarters in Baghdad, the passengers of the bus had their wounds attended to. The Iraqis started asking questions. Andrews said he would not tell them anything. They wheeled him down the hall. They said, “Look, we know you couldn’t talk in front of the other

Americans. Now you can talk. Nobody will ever know.”

Andrews said at this moment, knowing what airmen had done before, he knew his duty. He said he would tell them nothing. So they turned him over to two people who “beat the crap out of me,” he said.

It was an emotional roller coaster as well as a physical one, Andrews says today. Getting through one session, you tell them nothing, Andrews recalled, and you think you’re OK. Another one starts, then you think, what can I tell them? I flew an F-16? They know that, they found me next to a flaming F-16.

Then the war ended, and everything changed.

Andrews was shot down on the next to last day of Desert Storm. After it ended, US Central Command’s Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf made it clear what would happen if POWs weren’t turned over—and turned over in good shape. “They said, ‘Yes sir, three bags full,’ and turned us right over,” said Andrews in his oral history.

He flew out of Baghdad with other prisoners on a Red Cross charter. When they took off, everyone was quiet. When the pilot announced they were clearing Iraqi air space, everyone stayed quiet.

Then an F-15 pulled up on the right. Another one pulled up on the left. Everyone in the airplane went crazy, cheering the sight of the US Air Force.

Andrews was awarded the Air Force Cross for his heroism in the time immediately after he had been shot down. He “made numerous threat calls and directed members of his flight to execute a break turn and to initiate decoy flares in response to surface-to-air missile launches. Andrews “provided the support despite the fact that he had just suffered a broken leg and could not move, was exposed in the open, and was being fired upon by enemy forces.”

He returned to Iraq to fly combat missions enforcing the no-fly zones in 2001 and 2002 as commander of the 366th Operations Group. He subsequently served on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon and as a professor at the National Defense University. Andrews retired from the Air Force as a colonel in June 2010. ■

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