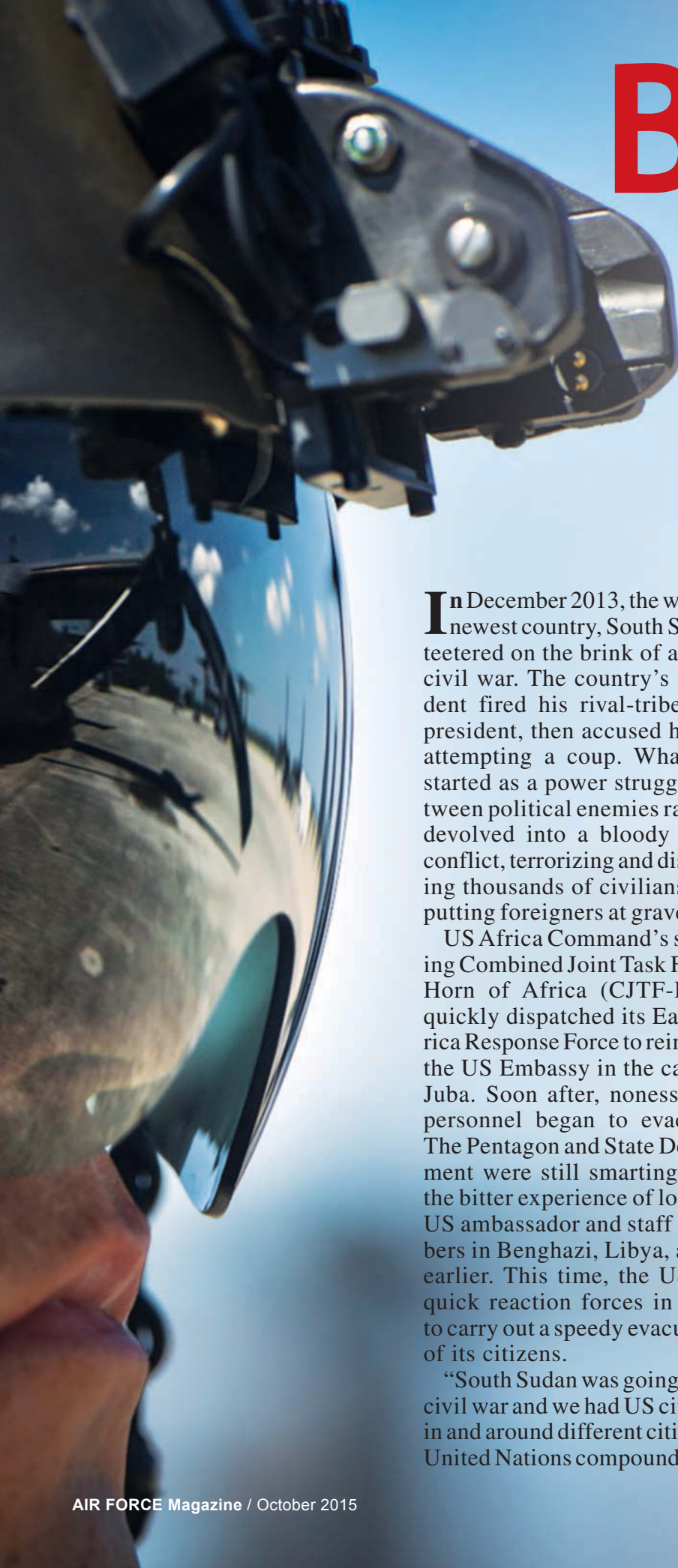
A CV-22 mission to evacuate Americans from violence in South Sudan nearly killed the rescuers.

MSgt. David Shea—then a technical sergeant—couldn't return fire because the rebels were hiding among the refugees thronging the UN compound in Bor.

Photo courtesy of Sean Mendis



Blood Over Bor

By Aaron M. U. Church, Associate Editor

In December 2013, the world's newest country, South Sudan, teetered on the brink of a fresh civil war. The country's president fired his rival-tribe vice president, then accused him of attempting a coup. What had started as a power struggle between political enemies rapidly devolved into a bloody tribal conflict, terrorizing and displacing thousands of civilians, and putting foreigners at grave risk.

US Africa Command's standing Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) quickly dispatched its East Africa Response Force to reinforce the US Embassy in the capital, Juba. Soon after, nonessential personnel began to evacuate. The Pentagon and State Department were still smarting from the bitter experience of losing a US ambassador and staff members in Benghazi, Libya, a year earlier. This time, the US had quick reaction forces in place to carry out a speedy evacuation of its citizens.

"South Sudan was going into a civil war and we had US citizens in and around different cities," at United Nations compounds, and in the embassy that needed to be evacuated, explained then-TSgt. David A. Shea, a CV-22 flight engineer with the 8th Special Operations Squadron, deployed from Hurlburt Field, Fla.

The CV-22s had been detached to Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, supporting CJTF-HOA when the call came on Dec. 18—three days after the unrest began—to start pulling embassy staff from South Sudan. Two C-130s and several tilt-rotor CV-22s—able to rotate their engines to fly like an airplane but take off and land like a helicopter—departed Camp Lemonnier en route to Juba to grab the first wave of evacuees.

After a 1,000-mile flight into South Sudan, the airlift armada found Juba Airport's single runway blocked.

"We flew all the way out there, but the C-130s weren't able to get in," Shea said. The runway was eventually cleared and the C-130s evacuated about 120 people to Nairobi, Kenya. The CV-22s turned back to Camp Lemonnier and "we thought that was the end of it," said Shea, but "it turns out there are a lot of Americans up

USAF photo

Shea kept pressure on a the special operations team leader's arterial wound during the long, dangerous flight to Entebbe Airport, Uganda, likely saving his life.

in Bor" at a UN compound as part of a peacekeeping mission there. In addition to the US and international staff, some 14,000 refugees fleeing the rebel onslaught had taken refuge at the base. Bor, the capital of South Sudan's largest state, Jonglei, was one of the first major areas to fall to the rebels, and the UN compound was now encircled by thousands of them.

Unlike Juba, which was held in government hands, it was tough to figure out who exactly controlled Bor. US officials contacted rebel leaders in the area and informed them US military forces would be arriving to extract Americans from the UN base. Shea and the rest of the extraction party were told that the rebels expected them and the landing zone would be a "permissive environment" with little to "no chance of catching any kind of fire at all."

ERUPTION

On Dec. 21, 2013, Shea's CV-22—call sign Rooster 73—lifted off from Camp Lemonnier. It led two other Ospreys—Rooster 74

The CV-22s were riddled with anti-aircraft and small-arms fire. All three were badly damaged, and none so much as Rooster 73, which lost electrical and hydraulics systems. A round pierced a particularly important fuel line that could not be isolated.

and Rooster 75—and took turns refueling from the MC-130P Combat Shadow en route to Bor, located another 1,000-mile flight from Djibouti. The passengers were a special operations security team to secure the landing zone, pararescue and medical personnel to treat potential injuries, and agency liaisons to coordinate the effort.

The three-ship formation dropped to low altitude as it approached the UN peacekeeping base, several miles east of Bor, and executed a low pass to assess conditions on the ground. Since the rebel forces had been notified in advance, seeing three Ospreys roaring overhead "shouldn't have been a surprise to them," said Shea. This time, the dirt airstrip adjacent to the UN compound appeared clear of obstructions, so Shea's lead Osprey circled back to the runway for touchdown.

Turning to land, "it just erupted," Shea said, describing how the rebel force fired on them. "They lit us up pretty good."

Just as Rooster 73 rotated its engine nacelles vertical for landing, anti-aircraft and small-arms fire tore through the fuselage.

"Right away, we had multiple systems failing," Shea said. He saw that "they had hit electrical systems, hydraulic systems," and fuel was spewing from the "only spot in our fuel lines that you can't isolate."

A flight engineer sits on the ramp of a CV-22 Osprey at Entebbe during the deployment for US Africa Command.

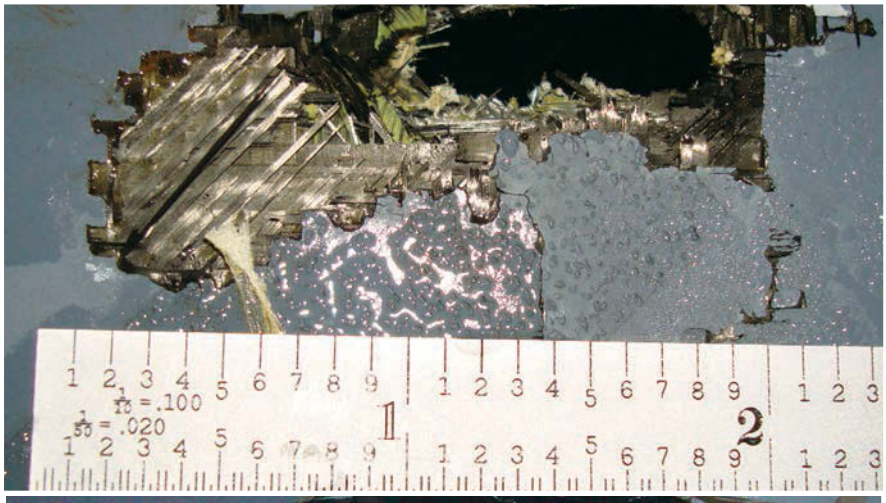
While assessing the damage, trying to identify targets, and manning the machine gun on the aft ramp, Shea took a hit directly to the chest. The force of the impact threw him several feet backward into the cargo bay, leaving him stunned on the floor. "Once I realized what just happened, I turned around and everybody was laying on the ground. … In my head, they were all dead. … Nobody was moving."

Shea hurriedly checked his body for wounds. He found none, although he was drenched in blood from the others. The round had smashed into his armored chest plate, leaving him stunned but relatively unhurt.

"I didn't really know if I was 'good'—I just didn't feel any pain," Shea said. Presuming his comrades dead, he clambered back to the gun in time to see the second and third Ospreys breaking away to dodge the firestorm. They were "just getting lit up from everywhere."

Shea could see muzzle flashes from the crowd below, but the throngs of civilian refugees cramming the makeshift camp made it impossible for the airmen to shoot back.

"These guys had embedded themselves inside of the crowd around the compound and they were everywhere—I mean just all over the place. It was a full-up ambush."



FLYING STRAIGHT

Extracting the people on the ground under intense fire was obviously out of the question, and the Ospreys were too badly damaged to make a second attempt.

As Shea's CV-22 left the area, vapors from the fuel leak made it so that "we couldn't even breathe in the cabin." He instinctively raised the rear ramp, not realizing this action would "spit out all of our hydraulic fluid" for most of the aircraft's tertiary systems. As the ramp closed, shutting out most of the vapors, his head began to clear.

All three Ospreys were badly damaged and "the chatter's just crazy" over the radios and the intercom, Shea recalled.

Pilots Maj. Ryan P. Mittelstet and Capt. Brett J. Cassidy coordinated with Shea's fellow flight engineer, SSgt. Christopher Nin, trying to get the aircraft "flying straight." Most of the rest of the passengers lay in blood on the floor.


USAF photo

The three Osprey crews received the 2013 Mackay Trophy for the Air Force's most meritorious flight of the year.

"They had all taken rounds through the lower extremities," and the injuries were bad—but not immediately fatal, as Shea had initially thought.

"Everybody's freaking out because those are their buddies, you know? Those are my buddies," he said.

Shea started to help patch up his wounded crewmates. The special operations team leader directly behind Shea had the most critical wounds, suffering an arterial bleed. The medics applied a tourniquet and Shea packed the wound with combat-gauze, but the bleeding wouldn't stop. "I had to keep pressure on it the entire flight" to the divert airfield, he said.

The formation opted to divert to Entebbe, Uganda, rather than risk a long return flight through the mountainous terrain and in the poor weather they'd flown through on the way to South Sudan. Still, Entebbe was some 400 miles away and the tilt-rotors would never make it on their own, given their battle damage.

Rooster 73 was gushing fuel "like crazy" and needed to refuel from a tanker—and quickly—to stay airborne. Fortunately, the MC-130 tankers were still orbiting "right where we needed them to be," said Shea.

As Rooster 73 prepared to rendezvous with the Combat Shadow, the crew realized their Osprey's auxiliary hydraulic system was completely out. Nin had to laboriously hand-crank the refueling probe to full extension—the first time to their knowledge that had ever been done on an operational mission.

Rooster 75—the third Osprey approaching the landing in Bor—was the least damaged and hung back to allow the torn-up lead and second aircraft to take fuel first.

With the refueling underway, one of the medics organized a "mobile blood bank" between the three aircraft so the seriously wounded could get transfusions as soon as they landed in Uganda. Shea was still keeping pressure on his crewmate's wound. "In the other hand I was holding an IV and trying to talk, give blood types," and help Nin with the aircraft.

Rooster 73 was spewing fuel so quickly it soon required a second tanker hookup. During the 90-minute flight from Bor to Entebbe, the long-ranged Osprey wouldn't normally need refueling, so after the first run at the tanker, Nin had diligently cranked the probe back into the stowed position. Now, "he had to crank that thing out twice, … which is some 300 cranks," Shea said. The Osprey had taken on some 12,000 pounds of fuel on the first go—about equal to the CV-22's entire fuel capacity—and now needed more because it was gushing out so rapidly.

LANDING AT ENTEBBE

To try to use the fuel before it sprayed away between refuelings, pilots Mittelstet and Cassidy throttled the Osprey full-out to cover the distance.

"Those guys were calm the whole time; they got the plugs that we needed and they got us home as fast as they could," Shea said.

As the Ospreys made it over the border into Uganda, the extent of the damage became more clear. They had lost a generator and the hydraulic system for the landing gear, fuel probe, ramp and door, nosewheel steering, and other systems. Without the hydraulic system, the pilots were forced to "blow down" the landing gear with an emergency pressurized nitrogen system on approach to Entebbe Airport.

Without wheel brakes or nosewheel steering, Rooster 73 had to hover-taxi its way to a parking spot. Even the parking brake was out of commission, and with no chocks on hand, Shea used ammo cans to block the tires and keep the Osprey from rolling across the ramp. "At the same time, I have to run back and start transloading the casualties" onto a waiting airlifter.

"Luckily, there was a C-17 that was on its way home—they kicked off all the Army guys" and began prepping the aircraft for an aeromedical evacuation to a trauma hospital in Nairobi.

Almost miraculously, most of the soldiers aboard the C-17 were part of a field medical team. The medics and surgeons "just jumped right into it, helping us out," Shea said. The blood donated by everyone aboard the CV-22s in the air was immediately transfused to the worst wounded.

"If they hadn't had that blood ready, some of them would not have survived," Shea said, but in the end, "we didn't lose anybody."

Although Rooster 73 took the brunt of the damage, Shea estimated the three aircraft were hit by nearly 200 rounds. The extent of the damage was "unprecedented" for the CV-22 fleet and Bell-Boeing engineers and technicians spent several months at Entebbe Airport putting the aircraft back together. "They figured it out, they flew them out of there. … They're flying now back at Hurlburt with Band-Aids all over them," Shea reported.

The Americans at the embattled UN compound in Bor were successfully evacuated to the capital, Juba, the following day, joining some 300 US personnel on military and contract flights out of the country.

The three 8th SOS Osprey crews received the 2013 Mackay Trophy for the Air Force's "most meritorious flight of the year," from the National Aeronautic Association. "The time critical decision-making, outstanding airmanship, extraordinary crew resource management … saved 34 aircrew and three $89 million aircraft," the award citation stated. ✪