

How many rockets can make plane land like a chopper?

Jane's reveals Iran hostage crisis engineering feat

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From Correspondent Richard Blystone

LONDON (CNN) -- Desperate times breed desperate measures, and the 1980 Iran hostage crisis was a desperate time for the United States, especially after one rescue mission in the Iranian desert met with disaster.

It's now known that the U.S. planned a second rescue attempt. For it, the U.S. military made radical modifications to a transport plane to make it take off and land almost like a helicopter, Jane's Defense Weekly disclosed Monday.



(Courtesy Jane's Defense Weekly)

The military modified a huge C-130 Hercules, adding rockets so that it could take off and land in little more than its own length. At the time of the project, 53 Americans were being held hostage in Tehran, and the first rescue mission, "Eagle Claw," had ended with an aircraft collision that killed eight U.S. soldiers.

Thus began a near-miracle of hastily organized high-tech tinkering called "Credible Sport."

"It was a desperate response to a very desperate situation," said Nick Cook of Jane's Defense Weekly.

His periodical has obtained films and documents on that response, classified for the last 16 years, which describe how hundreds of Navy and Air Force service members worked with Lockheed aircraft engineers to festoon the old C-130 workhorse with rockets, stuff it with new electronics, and carve the

fuselage into a hot rod.

Jane's won't say where the black-and-white footage came from, but the narration is unmistakably American military-speak.

The plane was equipped with lift rockets slanting downward, slowdown rockets facing forward, missile motors facing backward, and still more rockets to stabilize the plane as it touched down, in a Tehran soccer stadium -- so the plan went. Delta Force commandos would bring rescued hostages to the stadium, then everybody would brace for a leap to liberty.

"It was an extreme measure. Bear in mind 150 people would have been sitting in this thing as it would have blasted off, literally like a rocket, to get out of the stadium," Cook said.

The first modified plane, created in just a couple of months, crashed on the runway after a rocket went off prematurely and ripped off one of the plane's wings. Engineers never had to use the second modified plane they were working on: For good or ill, before it could be tried, Iran announced plans to free the hostages. "Credible Sport" stayed in the test phase.

The film makes clear that the program went on, as the narrator discusses "future flight test programs" to "further define aerodynamic performance." But by any measure, the technology is obsolete now.



The plane had rockets to stop it in a short distance (Courtesy Jane's Defense Weekly)

"The time for its secrecy is past," said Cook. "It's time for it to come into the light," as a triumph of impromptu engineering and a risk that didn't have to be taken.