



Iran, new details on F-15E crew recovery shot down in April: 50 hours behind enemy lines before US Special Forces arrival

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CBS reported it in the television program *60 Minutes*, which interviewed for the first time one of the two US Air Force officers involved in the incident and showed previously classified images of the operation.

The F-15E, call sign **Dude 44**, was shot down on **April 2, 2026** during a mission over Iran.

On board were two aviators: the pilot, referred to as **Alpha**, and the Weapon Systems Officer, identified for security reasons only as **Bravo**.

The two managed to eject, but landed on the ground approximately five miles apart from each other, separated in a desert and mountainous region in the heart of Iran.

From that moment, two profoundly different recovery operations began.

A mission against drone and missile infrastructure

According to Admiral **Brad Cooper**, the US commander responsible for operations, as explained to *60 Minutes*, the F-15E was operating south of Isfahan.

The area was also near sites linked to the Iranian nuclear program, but Dude 44's mission would not have targeted nuclear infrastructure.

The crew's task was instead to attack **industrial installations connected to Iranian drone and missile programs**.

The aircraft was hit by a **shoulder-fired missile**, a weapon with a cost enormously lower than the approximately 30 million dollars mentioned in the interview for the F-15E.

The crew initially attempted to save the aircraft, but the situation quickly became irreversible.

Bravo recalls the impact of the weapon as being hit by a “freight train”.

A few seconds later, the two aviators ejected.

Bravo's parachute was damaged

Alpha managed to land without suffering consequences comparable to those of his companion.

For Bravo, an immediate struggle for survival began.

The parachute had been damaged during the attack.

During the descent, the officer recalls looking upward and, for a moment, seeing practically nothing of the canopy above him.

He then desperately tried to free and extend what remained of the parachute.

It is not possible to establish with precision the speed of impact, but according to specialists consulted by the US Air Force, based on the injuries sustained, Bravo may have hit the ground at a speed between **70 and 100 miles per hour**, approximately **110-160 km/h**.

He survived, but with very serious consequences.

He suffered **a fractured spine, a fractured arm and shoulder, an ankle sprain, and numerous wounds to the head and face**.

And he was alone, in Iranian territory.

The first decision: to move

Despite his injuries, Bravo understood that remaining near the landing site would have been extremely dangerous.

He therefore moved away as quickly as possible.

When daylight broke, he realized he was inside a desert valley, surrounded by rocky walls.

The choice was drastic: **climb**.

With his back, an arm, and a shoulder fractured, Bravo began scaling the terrain until he reached a ridge at approximately **7,000 feet**, just over 2,100 meters in elevation.

When asked how he found the strength to continue, the answer given during the interview perfectly summarizes the situation:

«Never let a lack of motivation put you on Iranian TV».

Do not let the lack of motivation make you end up on Iranian television.

It was not a theoretical fear.

Shortly after the downing, an Iranian television announced a reward for the capture of the Americans, and videos began circulating of armed groups engaged in searches.

U.S. military sources reported that some Iranian forces came within **a few hundred meters of Bravo**.

Approximately 1,500 Iranians within a ten-mile radius

The United States simultaneously followed the movements of the opposing forces.

General **Dan Caine**, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained that the Americans were monitoring approximately **1,500 Iranian elements within a ten-mile radius** of the area.

The Iranian objective was clear: find the two aviators before the Americans.

Any captured U.S. Air Force crew shown in front of cameras would have represented, beyond an operational problem, an enormous propaganda success for Tehran.

The race against time had begun.

Alpha recovered after six hours: 21 aircraft in action

Approximately **six hours after the downing**, the United States managed to locate Alpha.

To recover him, a major operation was organized that, according to data provided in the interview, involved a total of **21 aircraft**.

Two helicopters entered the area to retrieve the pilot.

Images posted on social media showed the U.S. helicopters under fire.

General Caine described that phase with few words:

«It was a gunfight all the way in, all the way out».

A firefight during entry and during exit.

Alpha was recovered.

But the mission was only halfway through.

The same force attempted to locate Bravo as well, without success, and was eventually forced to withdraw.

Bravo's first signal

When night arrived, Bravo finally managed to find a position that guaranteed him minimal concealment and attempted to establish communications.

The message that reached American command contained three fundamental elements: **he was alive, he was wounded, and he was moving**.

From that moment on, the United States could begin seriously preparing a second operation.

But conditions did not allow for immediate intervention.

In the Situation Room, a difficult decision was made: postpone Bravo's recovery by another 24 hours.

Bravo was supposed to spend another day on the mountain, practically **without food and with very little water**, exposed to the wind and cold of the high-altitude desert.

The CIA Enters the Picture

This is one of the most significant elements revealed by the new reconstruction.

According to *60 Minutes*, the **CIA played a decisive role in preparing Bravo's recovery**.

The Agency conducted a multi-layered campaign, including **deception operations to confuse Iranian forces** and the use of classified technologies to determine the aviator's position with precision.

At the same time, preparations were underway for the recovery force to enter.

American bombers and drones struck units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the vicinity, in an attempt to reduce the threat around the area where Bravo was located.

Almost two days after Dude 44 was shot down, the United States decided to move in.

92 Men on Iranian Soil

The second operation was on a completely different scale.

When asked how many operators were directly involved, General Caine provided an impressive figure:

approximately 92 military personnel were on the ground.

According to the American reconstruction, it was the **first presence of U.S. troops on Iranian soil in 46 years**.

But those 92 men represented only the tip of the force.

Caine speaks of **several hundred military personnel engaged in the air** and an overall support apparatus that would have involved between **3,000 and 5,000 people**.

An operation within an operation.

To recover a single aviator isolated in the Iranian mountains, almost one hundred military personnel were therefore directly risking their lives on the ground.

The Aircraft Land in the Desert and Unload the Little Birds

The method chosen to reach Bravo demonstrates the complexity of the operation.

The recovery force entered Iran aboard **two large search and rescue aircraft**, which landed on an improvised airstrip in the desert.

Once on the ground, small helicopters **Little Birds** were unloaded from the aircraft, used to cover the final miles to the ridge where Bravo had taken refuge.

It was necessary to reach a wounded man in an extremely difficult position, while simultaneously keeping Iranian forces in the area under control.

Images declassified by the Pentagon show Bravo on the ridge waiting for rescuers to arrive.

Then two men appear.

They are **Pararescue personnel from the U.S. Air Force**, the renowned **PJs**.

The Pararescue Reach Bravo

The PJs represent one of the most specialized components of Air Force Special Warfare.

They are trained precisely to reach isolated personnel in hostile environments, provide medical assistance, and bring them back to safe territory.

Bravo recalls the arrival of the first Pararescueman on the ridge as «**one of the most beautiful moments of my life**».

He refused to publicly recount what the rescuer told him when he reached him, explaining that conversation belonged only to his own story.

Instead, he revealed his own words. They were very simple: "**Let's go**". Let's go.

Bravo was finally in American hands.

But the operation was far from over.

Now there were more than 90 Americans stranded in Iran

Once the recovery force returned to the makeshift runway in the desert, it encountered a new problem.

The **aircraft landing gear had become bogged down**. The planes could no longer take off.

What only minutes before had been an operation to save Bravo suddenly turned into another emergency: it was necessary to evacuate **more than 90 American soldiers left stranded on Iranian territory**.

The intervention was needed from what *60 Minutes* simply describes as **a clandestine unit of the US Air Force**.

The interview transcript does not identify the unit.

The new force managed to evacuate Bravo and the more than ninety operators left on the ground.

The aircraft immobilized in the desert, however, could not be left intact.

The United States therefore decided to **bomb its own aircraft**, destroying them to prevent sensitive technologies from falling into Iranian hands.

Fifty hours later

When Bravo finally returned safely, approximately **50 hours had passed since the F-15E was shot down**.

It was the dawn of Easter Sunday.

For nearly two days he had evaded Iranian forces with a broken back and other fractured limbs, very little water and no food, while thousands of American military personnel and specialists worked to locate and reach him.

The figures disclosed today give a measure of the operation:

21 aircraft in the first recovery mission for Alpha.

Approximately **1,500 Iranians monitored within ten miles** of the area.

92 American soldiers on the ground in the second incursion.

Several hundred in flight.

Between **3,000 and 5,000 people** involved overall in the support operation.

CIA, bombers, drones, Pararescue and Little Bird deployed to bring home a single man.

"Leave no man behind"

It is Bravo himself, at the end of the interview, who explains what he believes to be the true meaning of the story.

He does not want it to be remembered simply as the story of what he endured.

For the officer, it is above all a story of **training, teamwork, decision-making, leadership and the willingness to recover a man left behind enemy lines.**

An ability in which the United States continues to invest enormous resources.

The downing of Dude 44 demonstrates this in an almost extreme way.

To recover a single seriously wounded aviator on an Iranian mountain, Washington accepted putting nearly one hundred men on the ground, deploying hundreds of military personnel in flight and mobilizing thousands of people.

A promise encapsulated by one of the most deeply rooted expressions in American military culture:

Leave no man behind. No one is left behind.