AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present, & Future

Intelligence Surveillance & Reconnaissance

Early Air Commando ISR

The U-28

Emerald Coast Reapers: 65th SOS

Foreword by Bradley Heithold
Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)

ACA
ANY TIME ANY PLACE

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FOREWORD

"You can run, but you'll only die tired." Why? Because you can't hide from the heavily armed Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Airmen of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). ISR Air Commandos out-think, out-maneuver, and out-innovate our enemies. They provide joint force commanders an amazing range of ISR options by combining critical and creative thinking, technology, artificial intelligence, and guts to enable mission success. As the former commander of the Air Force ISR Agency, and also a former AFSOC Commander, I was extremely pleased when I was asked to pen the foreword for this edition of the *Air Commando Journal*.

Air Force Special Operations Forces have a long history of conducting ISR missions. From armed reconnaissance on the Ho Chi Minh trail using AC-130s in Vietnam, to today's hunting, tracking, and killing violent extremists using a multitude of unconventional fixed wing and remotely piloted aircraft, ISR has been an essential, but largely unknown, aspect of being an Air Commando. The men and women of AFSOC have created a world class distributed and networked exploitation system of sophisticated sensors and, most importantly, highly trained people who are skilled in multi-domain operations to find, fix and finish our nation's enemies.

Today, Air Commandos are retooling and transforming the existing ISR capabilities to address the new priorities recently established in the latest *National Defense Strategy*. Working behind the scenes, as quiet professionals do, ISR Air Commandos are leveraging enhanced cyber and space capabilities to strengthen an already formidable capability. By fusing signal intelligence (SIGINT) and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities, Air Commandos are pushing the envelope of digital age opportunities and applying them in the air to deter and defeat adversaries. As special operations and the nature of our nation's enemies have evolved so, too, has the special operations ISR mission.

This edition of the *ACJ* highlights a number of ways innovative thinking and good old Air Commando spirit have used and adapted conventional and commercial hardware to address ever-evolving SOF mission requirements. The *ACJ* editors have put together a series of great articles to show the readers the essence of what makes AFSOC's ISR team work. It is definitely not the whole story, but a great introduction. I am really proud of all the ISR warriors in AFSOC who know what right looks like in the invaluable ISR business. As is always the case with Air Commandos, failure is not an option and, without a doubt, this volume drives that home.

Bradley A. Heithold, Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)
Former Commander, Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency
Former Commander, Air Force Special Operations Command

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CHINDIT CHATTER

The Air Commando Association prides itself in serving as the "Tribe of Tribes," the full spectrum of Air Commandos encompassing all realms, platforms, and most of all, people that have done and are still doing great things for the nation. As we all know, it takes a "team of teams" and a wide variety of skills and platforms to ensure mission success in today's complex and highly volatile battlefield. As in the past, we have chosen one of those tribes or teams to highlight in an edition of the *Air Commando Journal*. In each past issue, we have tried to show the capabilities of the various platforms, but most of all, reinforcing the SOF truth that humans are more important than hardware. This edition is no different as we chose to theme this effort around the capabilities and contributions of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) mission set.

For time eternal, having good intelligence of a combatant's capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses for countering and exploitation has been critical to success on the battlefield. Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu deemed it essential and their eternal wisdom has proven accurate every day during modern-day efforts to defeat terrorists and all things evil. Only the platforms for acquiring that key essential element have changed. In this edition of *ACJ*, we show how rapid adaptations of technology and innovation, coupled with true Air Commando spirit have changed the ISR realm forever. We explore some historical uses of using technology unique to AC-130s to accomplish the ISR mission in Central America that they were not intended for—using available equipment in ways not anticipated by the enemy. Additionally, we have a great article that demonstrates how identification of a battlefield need rapidly went from concept to combat—the rapid development and fielding of the manned U-28 ISR platform . Additionally, several articles show how Air Commandos embraced new concepts and requirements to absorb and adapt the rapidly changing world and use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs). This edition of the journal also showcases the quiet professionals of the ISR team at Joint Special Operations Air Component—Africa. The challenges they overcome every day to ensure the SOF teams on the ground have the ISR they need, when they need it, is inspirational. As you explore these efforts with us, I think you will agree that the SOF truth about the importance of humans in the equation, and more importantly, the Air Commando ethos, come through loudly and clearly throughout.

Unfortunately, we are constantly reminded that rarely is a new capability fielded and sent in to combat without major sacrifices. Sadly, far too often, that includes some that have paid the ultimate sacrifice. The U-28 is no exception. Therefore, we dedicate this edition of the *ACJ* to the crews of two U-28s that were tragically lost. The first was a combat loss in Africa in 2012, and the second, a training mishap at Cannon, AFB in 2017. May they all rest in peace and may God bless their families, friends, and teammates.

Capt Ryan P. Hall, (Pilot, 30, 319th SOS), Capt Nicholas S. Whitlock, (Copilot, 29, 34th SOS), 1st Lt Justin J. Wilkens (Combat Systems Officer, 26, 34th SOS), SrA Julian S. Scholten, (Tactical Systems Operator, 26, 25th Intelligence Squadron).

Capt Andrew Becker (Pilot, 33, 318th SOS), Capt Kenneth Dalga (Combat Systems Officer, 29, 318th SOS), 1st Lt Frederick Dellecker (Copilot, 26, 318th SOS).

Any Time - Any Place

Dennis Barnett, Col, USAF (Ret)
ACA Chief Operating Officer and Editor-in-Chief

Early Air Commando ISR

AC-130 Spectres Over El Salvador, 1983-1990

By Bill Walter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

Editor's note: Chief Walter is the Spectre Association Historian and details early Air Commando efforts in Sensitive Reconnaissance Operations known today as the Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance or ISR mission set. At the time, the AC-130's unique mission equipment was ideally suited for the nascent AFSOC mission and provides a historical perspective of Air Commando involvement in post-Vietnam era national security issues. The article is an excellent primer to the other essays included in this issue focused on the development and deployment of AFSOC's diverse ISR capability and the people who execute today's mission 24/7/365.

US military strategy in the late 1970s focused almost exclusively on a "World War III" scenario in Europe between the USSR and NATO allies. The bulk of US military spending was dedicated towards what was referred to as the Cold War, a threat-on-threat stalemate between the east and west. At the time, Cuba was the only communist nation near the continental United States and little attention was given to Central and South America.

In the summer of 1979, Nicaragua fell to communist rule. In the fall of 1979, a full-scale civil war broke out in El Salvador between the right-wing Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG) and the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Carter Administration supported the JRG with military aid hoping the situation would stabilize with time and effort.

By 1980, the JRG had morphed into a full-fledged military government that ruled by force, intimidation, and murder. In February of 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote a letter to President Carter requesting cessation of military aid because the JRG was killing scores of Salvadoran citizens who opposed military rule. About a month later, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while celebrating mass. A week later, at his funeral, 42 mourners were killed by Salvadoran Army snipers. In December of 1980, members of the Salvadoran National Guard were suspected of raping and killing three American nuns and a missionary. In response, military aid was cut off, but was re-established just six weeks later.

During 1981 and 1982, El Salvadoran Army and FMLN tactics became increasingly violent, resulting in murders by death squad and large-scale massacres of those suspected of supporting the FMLN. In 1982, the FMLN began calling for a peace settlement while elections were being held. In the end, the voting process was stymied by threats of violence, attacks, and boycotts, rendering the results invalid.

With the situation unravelling in El Salvador and the potential for a communist takeover, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) found intelligence provided by the Salvadoran Army to be unreliable and untrustworthy. Determined to acquire accurate and timely intelligence information, US Army Special Forces were deployed to monitor Salvadoran counter insurgency operations. At the same time, the 16th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) AC-130H's were selected to surveille and record movements of the Salvadoran Army and FMLN guerrillas during the hours of darkness. Though the Sensitive Reconnaissance Operations (SRO) mission was far removed from typical gunship tasking, the AC-130 could observe areas for hours at a time, and its night-time sensor and video recording capabilities were rare commodities in the DOD.

On 27 Feb 1983, the JCS Chairman, GEN John Vessey directed the classified reconnaissance effort Operation BIELD KIRK to begin. To maintain operational security, AC-130 personnel deployed under routine travel orders indicating destination as "Anyplace within Central America." The deployment cover story was listed as unit support of 193rd Infantry Brigade, but there was no interaction with that unit whatsoever. On 28 February, an advance echelon team was activated, 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) Detachment 1 (Det-1), at Howard AFB in Panama.

In early March, four AC-130H gunships, five crews, and support personnel departed Hurlburt Field for Howard AFB. Supporting the gunships were two KC-135 tankers, crews, and support personnel from the 305th Air Refueling Wing, Grissom AFB in Indiana. Upon arrival, the officers were billeted in the visiting officers quarters (VOQ) near the O-Club. Enlisted crewmen were billeted in family housing units near the Navy's Farfan housing area. There were operational security concerns with crews billeted in base housing; however, since neighbors had previously seen overflow from billeting, there were no questions asked or accusations made by base housing residents. AC-130 maintainers stayed in barracks on Howard near the flight line and their aircraft.

The Gunship maintainers worked around the clock to prepare each aircraft for mission tasking. Since arming of peace-time SRO aircraft was not permitted, the number-one gun had its barrels removed and the number-two 20mm gun was removed entirely. The 40mm gun barrel and the 105mm blast diffuser were also removed and the 105's muzzle was closed off with tape. The unarmed mandate also extended to personal defense weapons. Crews were not allowed to carry their customary self-defense .38 caliber revolvers. The only weapon aircrews were allowed was a survival knife.

Initially, the Salvadoran Army was not advised of the AC-130's mission. Instead, crew deception and uniform sanitation procedures included removal of all insignia and unit patches and the use of a cover story of being a on a cargo aircraft delivering humanitarian supplies. The only identification allowed on a mission was the standard AF black leather aircrew name tag, the Geneva Convention ID card, and dog tags. A small personal survival kit was permitted as long as it met security sanitization requirements. The only other item allowed to be taken was an escape & evasion (E&E) kit furnished by the intelligence office which was signed out before the mission and turned in after they returned.

Typical mission profiles were repetitive. Before take-off, during mission planning, crews were given a prioritized list of targets to surveille and routes between the targets. Because of the distance involved, mission length was usually over ten hours long. The flight planned route was northwest off the west coast of Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras for nearly three hours. (See map on page 10) Once near the

coast of El Salvador, the gunship would rendezvous with a KC-135 tanker using standard en route overtaking with minimal lighting and conducted in radio silence (known as Gin Bear procedures). During the operation, the only communication the AC-130 crew had with the tanker was through the refueling boom when they were connected. Once fully refueled, the tanker returned to Howard AFB and the AC-130 continued towards El Salvador. Aircrews then turned off all exterior lighting and blacked out the interior lights, as much as possible.

They practiced extreme light discipline in order to conceal the aircraft while overhead an objective area. Crews used night vision goggles (NVGs) extensively and even the smallest amount of stray light would cause the early versions of NVGs to "bloom" rendering them ineffective. To mitigate this phenomenon, and to prevent guerrillas from seeing stray light from the aircraft, crews either reduced the intensity level to minimum or removed small light bulbs completely at Flight Station-245 (the bulkhead between the cockpit and cargo compartment) and anywhere near the gun positions. To facilitate better visual surveillance and sensor cueing, one of the 20mm gun ports was covered with plexiglas. This allowed a gunner to act as a left scanner in order to identify potential targets and talk the sensor operators on to the target.

Before crossing into Salvadoran airspace, crews were required to check in with two US mission monitors. The first was a command and control communications ship stationed off the coast, call sign *Jittery Prop*. The second was a mountain-top US radar site code named *Carrot Top*. When all prerequisites were met, crews went "feet dry" near the river outlet at La Union or near the Rio Lempa and the Playa de Icacal at altitudes ranging from 6000-8000 feet above the terrain. It was not uncommon for crews to be re-tasked in flight depending on the ground situation being reported, but most missions went as planned. Typically, crews were directed to search and video record an average of 6-10 locations per mission. However, during high activity periods, upwards of 20 targets were tasked for surveillance.

Though the AC-130 operated above the threat range of small arms, they would occasionally see small arms tracer fire that fell off before reaching altitude. On an early mission, one of the crews did spot suspected 20mm AAA fire from an El Salvadoran Army gun site, but no damage occurred.

After about four hours in country, with adequate fuel remaining to return to Howard AFB, crews exited the country for a three hour return flight. It was difficult for some to stay awake on the return leg of the mission which was usually

between 0400-0500 in the morning. The navigator's duties and light emitted from his equipment usually kept him awake, but the pilots and flight engineer were in the dark and on auto-pilot. On more than one occasion the navigator called for a heading change at a way point only to discover the pilots and flight engineer fast asleep, strapped into their seats!

> The missions were long, with some "dawn patrols" that landed after sun up the next morning. After a particularly long mission, we were getting radar vectors to Howard AFB and the copilot was flying on a heading to the final approach course. I saw we were approaching final but the copilot did not start the turn onto final. I asked twice if he was going to turn but got no response. I looked over and saw the copilot, chin resting on his chest, sound asleep. I was not surprised since we had not yet adapted to a full night schedule. He bought the first round of "bravos" that morning.
>
> -- Lt Col (ret) Tom Waylett, Aircraft Commander

Capt Waylett's crew on the first deployment of BIELD KIRK, 1983. (Photo courtesy of Bill Walter)

The gunship crew would typically land at Howard AFB as the sun began to rise, debrief their findings and submit video tapes to intelligence analysts for review and study. Initially, two missions were flown every night, but eventually the tasking was reduced to one sortie per night. There were, however, critical time periods where the unit would surge and provide additional aircraft and crews to fly the mission. These periods normally coincided with events such as elections or holidays.

Mission tasking was high during the first two weeks of the operation. It was always dark by the time AC-130s skirted the coast of Nicaragua while over international waters. On one occasion during this portion of the mission, crewmembers reported they were being shadowed by small aircraft. Intelligence analysts believed crews were seeing things and the stars were playing tricks on them, but the crews were certain there was something following them. The small aircraft always appeared to be behind the gunship, just after coming off the tanker and prior to going "feet dry" into El Salvador. The aircraft appeared to be a Lear jet, but they stayed just far enough away to make positive identification difficult. About three weeks into the mission, the lead-in story on ABC News showed an AC-130 taking off from Howard AFB accompanied with a headline that AC-130 Gunships were flying missions over El Salvador. Obviously, the origin of the shadows was exposed.

After the story broke, Howard AFB locals started watching the flight line closely. For weeks, reporters with binoculars could see AC-130s come and go. They would see fresh aircraft come in from Hurlburt Field and watch as the gun barrels were being removed and dream up wild reasons for it. One news article accused AC-130 crews of "firing so much the barrels had to be changed after every mission," a claim aircrews found particularly amusing since they didn't carry ammunition.

Though OPSEC had been compromised, the missions continued unabated while the Salvadoran Army thought the AC-130s were focusing their attention solely on the FMLN, but in fact, both sides were being watched. During the following months, crews and maintainers were rotated from Hurlburt Field to Howard AFB on a regular 45-day basis. (The rotations were later reduced to 30 days, then 14 days during the second year of the operation.) Missions continued, activity was observed, videotaped and reported to the Intel shop on every flight, except when weather was a factor.

In August 1983, the US and Honduras began a large-scale military exercise code named Operation BIG PINE. The US Navy participated by sending two carrier battle groups (CVBG) to operate off the coast of Honduras. Since the BIELD KIRK mission was classified, the Navy was not aware of the nightly AC-130 missions, which would pass almost directly overhead. Similarly, the Gunship crews were unaware of the position of the CVBGs.

> On one mission, just after coming off the tanker, the scanners reported bogeys approaching the aircraft. In a flurry of traffic calls, the scanners informed me that there were F-14 fighters off of each wing. As I was talking to the Nav about getting hold of the Navy to have them call off their dogs, the IO called to tell me to "hold what you got" because there was an F-14 pilot looking at him through the bubble. He was in close trail and the IO thought if we made any move, we'd have a midair…that got the adrenalin flowing!
>
> -- Lt Col (ret) Tom Waylett, Aircraft Commander

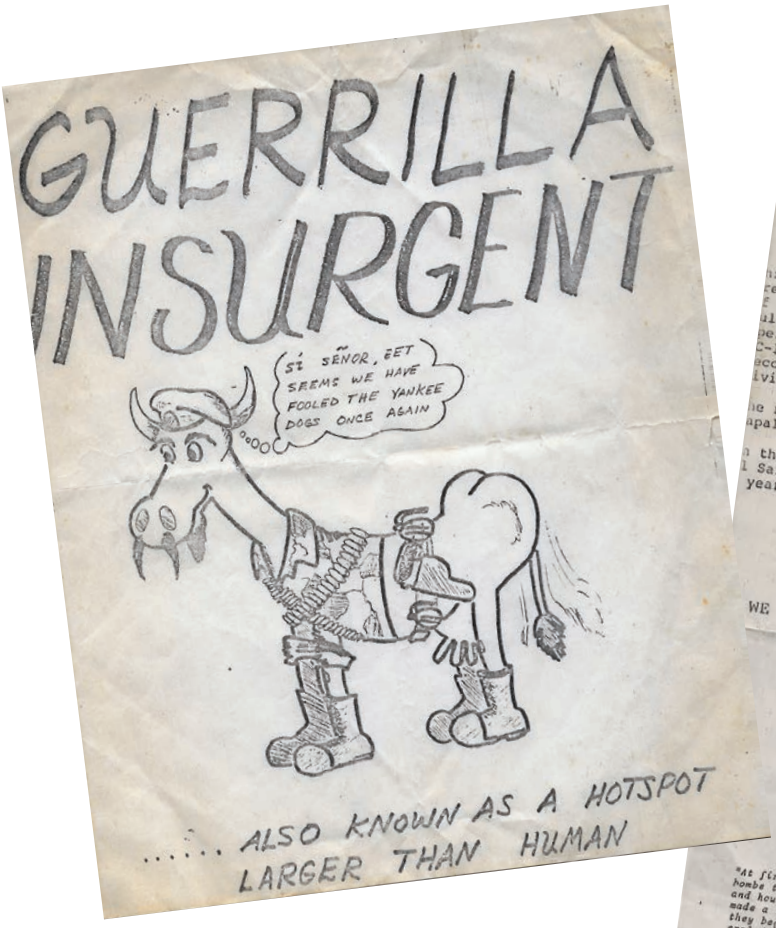
On 8 Aug 1984, the US State Department and US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) gave a joint news briefing covering "Intelligence Information on External Support of the Guerrillas" in El Salvador. The original briefing was classified and prepared for members of the Congress. But, Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, at the urging of Congressional members, worked with the DOD to declassify 95 percent of the briefing material.

At the press conference, Ambassador Pickering and the USSOUTHCOM Commander-in-Chief, GEN Paul F. Gorman, told the world about external FMLN support coming from Nicaragua via land and sea to support the guerrillas. During the course of the briefing, AC-130 activities were publicly disclosed including video of arms transfers from ships into

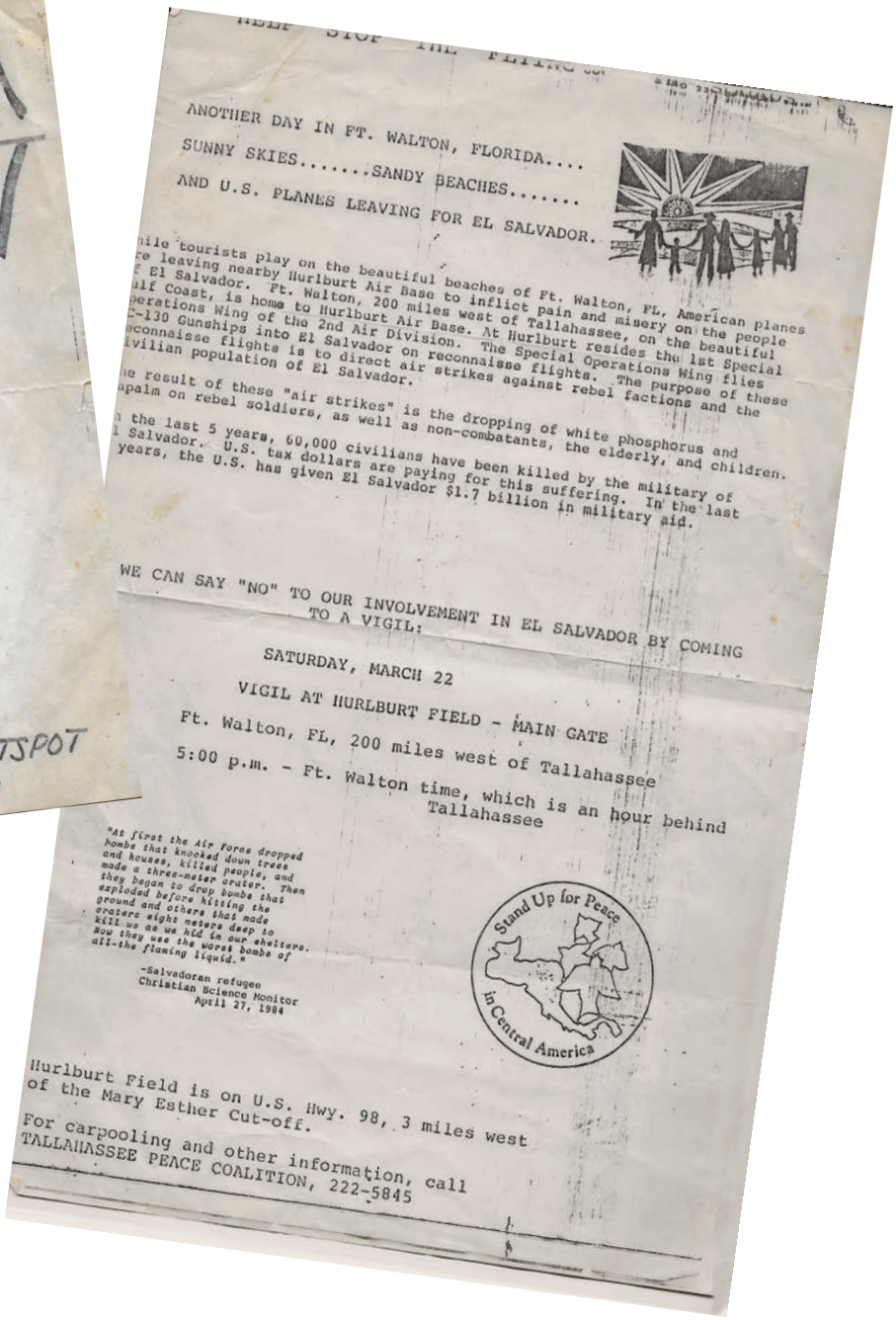
large ocean-capable canoes (called cayucas). The AC-130 video also recorded overland movement of arms shipments within El Salvador and from Honduras by pack animals.

When the AC-130 connection to BIELD KIRK was revealed, the mission continued under a different code name BLUE FLAME. As a result of the revelation, the guerrillas sought cover whenever they heard a gunship approaching overhead. Concealment from the gunship in open terrain was futile since hot spots were easy to detect on the infrared (IR) sensor. During high-moon illumination conditions, personnel were easy to spot with both low light level television (LLTV) and IR sensors. Once individuals were spotted, gunship crews reported activity to *Jittery Prop* or *Carrot Top* who would advise the Salvadoran Army. This lash-up worked very effectively especially with the US-trained battalions and the Salvadoran-trained, anti-terrorist, Ponce battalion. FMLN guerrillas were aware that being spotted by the AC-130 would certainly be followed by an attack by the El Salvadoran Army. The BLUE FLAME missions continued in 1986 and the guerrillas became more proficient at avoiding detection. Essentially, anytime an AC-130 was overhead, the guerrilla forces remained hidden and became tactically insignificant.

Year-round weather conditions limited intelligence collection efforts. During the dry season, the countryside was covered with agricultural burns and ever-present livestock. Gunship sensors were state-of-the-art, but it was still difficult to distinguish between a group of humans or a group of cattle moving through tall grass and jungle. Crews recorded



Drawing posted on the wall of the Intel shop at Howard AFB in the later stages of BLINKING LIGHT. Crews were directed to not use the term "cattle" on the BDA tape and instead use the term "hotspot larger than human."



ANOTHER DAY IN FT. WALTON, FLORIDA....
SUNNY SKIES.....SANDY BEACHES.....
AND U.S. PLANES LEAVING FOR EL SALVADOR.

hile tourists play on the beautiful beaches of Ft. Walton, FL, American planes re leaving nearby Hurlburt Air Base to inflict pain and misery on the people f El Salvador. Ft. Walton, 200 miles west of Tallahassee, on the beautiful ulf Coast, is home to Hurlburt Air Base. At Hurlburt resides the 1st Special perations Wing of the 2nd Air Division. The Special Operations Wing flies C-130 Gunships into El Salvador on reconnaisse flights. The purpose of these econnaisse flights is to direct air strikes against rebel factions and the ivilian population of El Salvador.

e result of these "air strikes" is the dropping of white phosphorus and apalm on rebel soldiers, as well as non-combatants, the elderly, and children.

n the last 5 years, 60,000 civilians have been killed by the military of l Salvador. U.S. tax dollars are paying for this suffering. In the last years, the U.S. has given El Salvador $1.7 billion in military aid.

WE CAN SAY "NO" TO OUR INVOLVEMENT IN EL SALVADOR BY COMING TO A VIGIL:

SATURDAY, MARCH 22

VIGIL AT HURLBURT FIELD - MAIN GATE

Ft. Walton, FL, 200 miles west of Tallahassee

5:00 p.m. - Ft. Walton time, which is an hour behind Tallahassee

"At first the Air Force dropped bombs that knocked down trees and houses, killed people, and made a three-meter crater. Then they began to drop bombs that exploded before hitting the ground and others that made craters eight meters deep to kill us as we hid in our shelters. Now they use the worst bombs of all-the flaming liquid."

-Salvadoran refugee
Christian Science Monitor
April 27, 1984

Stand Up for Peace in Central America

Hurlburt Field is on U.S. Hwy. 98, 3 miles west of the Mary Esther Cut-off.

For carpooling and other information, call TALLAHASSEE PEACE COALITION, 222-5845

Handout during a protest at the front gate of Hurlburt Field.

everything they saw and routinely reported cattle sightings. Intelligence analysts questioned whether some of the targets were cattle and called reports inconclusive. Gunship crews were confident they were sighting cattle since there is no mistaking a 1,000 pound steer for a 150 pound man. Since all video tapes were sent to the JCS at the Pentagon for review, gunship crews were chastised for identifying most unidentifiable hot spots as cattle. From that point on, AC-130 crews were prohibited from using any and all descriptions of cattle. Instead, the acceptable term mandated was "hot spot larger than human," which was used for the remainder of the operation.

By 1986, the fact AC-130s were flying missions over El Salvador became common knowledge and there were a number of organized protests at the Hurlburt Field front gate. Over time, the operation name was changed to BLINKING LIGHT but the mission remained the same. At one point in 1986, under the code name of Operation NINE IRON, two aircraft were tasked to strike two targets in El Salvador. AC-130 crews, supported by KC-135 tankers, flew non-stop from Hurlburt Field across Honduras and into El Salvador. About six hours into the mission, both crews were over their assigned targets with guns armed and ready to fire. But, after orbiting for almost an hour waiting for clearance to shoot, the crews were ordered to abort their missions and return to base. After almost 14 hours in the air, the AC-130s landed uneventfully at Hurlburt, appearing as if they had just returned from a routine training mission.

On 17 Jun 1986, one of the support KC-135A tankers took off from Howard AFB on what was then the standard profile and refueled the gunship. But, after the AC-130 completed its mission and returned to Howard AFB, the crew was told that the KC-135 that refueled them had crashed on landing with no survivors. The aircrew members, Capt Thomas McDerby, aircraft commander; 1 Lt John Bristow, copilot; 1 Lt Wayne K.S. Ching, navigator; and SSgt Quinn Dewitt, boom operator were all from the 305th ARW in Indiana.

Tragic as the KC-135 accident was AC-130H gunship crews continued flying nightly missions to El Salvador until 15 Oct 1987 when BLINKING LIGHT missions were scaled back to focus on security of US facilities and personnel stationed in Panama. In 1987, the United States Special Operation Command (USSOCOM) was established, followed by the 23rd Air Force the USAF air component of USSOCOM in 1988. Both commands technically owned the AC-130 fleet which was in high demand for special operations tasking. The JCS, however, maintained a stranglehold on the small fleet for BLINKING LIGHT. In light of the change in AC-130 command structure, the 23rd commander, Brig Gen Robert Patterson, and the 16th SOS commander, Lt Col Howard Chambers, grew increasingly concerned that gunship crew readiness was being negatively affected by the BLINKING LIGHT mission. Further, AC-130 missions at Howard AFB were split between BLINKING LIGHT and a new tasking called PRAYER BOOK. PRAYER BOOK was a new mission created to provide direct security support for the Panama Canal Zone because of deteriorating relations with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega.

Air Force Reserve AC-130A gunships from Duke Field's 711th SOS were also tasked to support the USSOUTHCOM SRO mission. Unfortunately, they were not equipped with inflight refueling capability which limited their ability to perform the BLINKING LIGHT mission from Howard AFB. As a result, the 711th A-model gunships and crews were deployed to Palmerola AB in Honduras from August to September 1988 to evaluate potential to move the operation there. Unfortunately, the deployment had multiple operational, infrastructure, and support problems which deemed operations unfeasible. The result was to maintain BLINKING LIGHT operations at Howard AFB. From there, the 16th SOS would "dual-hat" missions between BLINKING LIGHT and PRAYER BOOK, while AC-130A gunships would fly PRAYER BOOK missions exclusively. This arrangement continued until the operation officially ended in 1990.

Mission Debrief

The AC-130 commitment to the mission in El Salvador ran continuously for nearly seven years. National Command Authorities were satisfied with the intelligence collected by AC-130 crews, even though it was difficult to differentiate guerrilla activity from the normal day-to-day activities of honest farmers and ranchers. The psychological effect, however, of the nightly AC-130 missions caused many FMLN guerrillas to either scramble or hide when hearing the sound of the gunship approaching with the effect of slowing or halting the pace of guerrilla operations.

Gunship crews found the missions long, tedious, and sometimes boring. At the time, it was the longest duration continuous mission to date accomplished by the 16th SOS and was considered both good and bad for the squadron.

On the good side, direct JCS mission tasking ensured the AC-130H would not be retired, regardless of the desires of the Air Force's Tactical Air Command or Military Airlift Command, who were vying for limited funding resources. Another positive element was the upgrade of the communications suite to include modern, secure satellite radios. On the negative side, the squadron of 10 aircraft was spread very thin from 1983-1988 while supporting missions in El Salvador, Grenada, and Panama, as well as exercises in Korea, Alaska and elsewhere. Attempts to reinforce the 16th SOS AC-130 operations in Central America with the Air Force Reserve AC-130A aircraft were limited since none of the A-models were equipped with aerial refueling capability. However, 711th SOS AC-130A sorties were flown from Honduras for a short time and they bolstered the PRAYER BOOK missions securing the Panama Canal Zone.

Overall, the mission in El Salvador proved the validity of situational awareness, psychological effects, and sensor capabilities of the AC-130. It also proved the adaptability of AC-130 crews in the SRO realm, who successfully completed their mission without firing a shot.

About the Author: CMSgt (ret) Bill Walter is a former AC-130 gunner. He is currently the Spectre Association Historian.

Welcome to Air Force Special Operations Command

"YOU ARE NOW SOF"

By Col Stephen C. Price, USAF

These are my opening words to our newest graduates of the Air Force Special Operations Forces Intelligence Formal Training Unit. It is not an "everyone gets a trophy moment." It is not a throw away phrase to build morale. It is not based on them wearing a patch that says "special operations" on their shoulder. It is a challenge I give them.

Being SOF means living up to a shared standard. It is about being held accountable for your job and your contribution to the mission. It is about the SOF mindset.

There have been many efforts to define special operations. To identify what makes SOF special. And to determine whether it is the people who are special or just the missions.

Competing Definitions

The most common explanation of "special operations" is whatever the general purpose forces (GPF) cannot do. As an example, for Operation EAGLE CLAW, the pilots flew using night vision goggles (NVGs). This was a capability that did not exist in the conventional forces at the time. Unfortunately for this definition, it's transitory. Now, flying with NVGs is common and therefore no longer "special." Being early adopters of new technologies or tactics is a key

aspect of SOF, but only one aspect.

In his seminal book *Spec Ops*, ADM William H. McRaven identifies special operations as "conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (in the case of hostages), is a political or military imperative." ADM McRaven then goes onto identify six principles of special operations (simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose). Following these principles, according to his theory, is what makes special operations forces successful.

This all sounds good except for two problems. First, this isn't so much a theory of special operations as it is about "direct action" (DA) missions. All of the case studies cited in McRaven's book are direct action missions, and he admits this was intentional. This does not cover the many other roles of SOF which include irregular warfare, psychological operations, global access, or foreign internal defense. And second, everyone uses these same principles to ensure success.

Lucien S. Vandenbroucke takes the same position as McRaven by identifying special operations as "secret military or paramilitary strikes, approved at the highest level of the…government after detailed review. Executed in limited time and with limited resources, they seek to resolve through the sudden, swift, and unconventional application of force, major problems of…foreign policy." Once more, this definition leaves out the full-spectrum of special operations missions while allowing for non-SOF elements to conduct these missions simply because there is limited time and limited available resources for the given mission. We will explore this further in our discussion of Operation EAGLE CLAW.

Dr. James D. Kiras begins to approach the true nature of special operations with his definition, "Special operations can inflict disproportionate moral damage, in conjunction with strikes against material resources, by virtue of their ability to accomplish what was previously thought impossible." While there is again an emphasis on "strikes" and the ability of "disproportionate" forces to achieve success, we begin to see the hint of what makes SOF unique: the ability to cause "moral damage" and "to accomplish what was previously thought impossible." Unfortunately, Kiras's definition is still too generic and leaves open the possibility that air power in its many forms represents a special operations capability. Too generic a definition limits the ability of choosing the right personnel for special operations and identifying which missions can be conducted by conventional forces and which ones must be conducted by designated special operations forces.

The most complete definition of special operations forces is provided by Dr. Robert G. Spulak who first identifies the three most common frictions of war (the high intensity of short notice and strategically significant

missions, the inability to predict what is going to happen, and the inability to know what is out there) and then provides three attributes required by special operations personnel to overcome those frictions. These attributes are that each is an elite warrior, they are flexible, and they are creative. This latter, in the modern parlance would be better defined as innovative as we are not interested in the individual's ability to finger paint or express themselves in interpretive dance.

Elite Warriors

Because of the intense stresses of combat, special operators are expected to be in top physical and mental condition. However, not all special operations are conducted amidst the chaos and violence of combat. But in every case, the SOF operator must be at the peak of their capabilities in order to conduct their operations under a wide variety of conditions, typically under very demanding timelines, and with little to no support upon which to rely. Simply put, a SOF mindset demands the individual to be the absolute best in their respective career fields.

MQ-9 Load Crew (Photo courtesy of USAF)

Of course, some of these criteria are more easily discerned in some SOF operators. A special tactics Airmen is clearly elite based on their level of physical fitness. They can swim farther, run longer, and bench press more than the average Airmen. So, what does being an elite warrior look like with regards to an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) Air Commando?

Brig Gen Donald D. Blackburn, the Army officer in charge of the joint task force that executed the Son Tay Prison Raid, Operation KINGPIN, described one of his intelligence analysts, Capt John H. Knops, as "the shining star of the entire intelligence group." It was agreed throughout the military intelligence community that if you needed to get forces into North Vietnam undetected, Knops was the man who knew how to "thread the needle." In the aftermath of the Son Tay raid, the returning aircrew were amazed to report the air-to-air and air-to-surface engagements occurred precisely as Capt Knops had predicted.

SOF operators don't care about the "scare badges" on your chest or the patch on your shoulder. They want to know that you are the very best at your job and that you are a fully committed and contributing member of the team. If you are not, regardless of your specialty, they don't need you. And they will find someone else who is the best.

SOF legend and team leader of the Son Tay Raid, as well as a key member of Operation EAGLE CLAW, Dick Meadows had this to say about the other members of the Son Tay Task Force:

> I don't think the world had ever seen, and maybe still hasn't seen, so much air-planning and flying expertise gathered under one command. Say what you will about the ground force's mission, but to me it was the infiltration and exfiltration that was key....I used to listen to the planners and pilots discussing and sometimes arguing about ways and means and I was always amazed at the enthusiasm and knowledge...without exception, you just felt comfortable. ... Regardless of his role, everybody was working to the success of the mission… You get a team like that and that's what SF is all about...None of us ever doubted their commitment and ability.

Flexible

The inability to predict what will occur on a mission demands that special operators possess a range of skills allowing them to adapt to different situations. For example, being able to skydive, SCUBA dive, or handle a small boat, allows members of the Navy SEALs to infiltrate a target area by many different ways. Many of these skills require long lead times to perfect and such prior training therefore helps to overcome the inability to predict what obstacles might be encountered during mission planning. However, more useful than skills previously possessed is the ability of special operators to learn new skills in a relatively short amount of time. McRaven recounts that during the train-up for the Son Tay Prison Raid, Special Forces (SF) troopers were able to quickly adapt new low-light sighting technologies for their weapons to greatly improve accuracy in engaging prison guards. Dr. Spulak points out what is considered a "unique" skill at one point in time soon becomes conventional, but it is the ability of special operators to quickly adopt new skills with previously unproven technologies that make them "special."

A better word to describe the SOF attitude tied to flexibility is "curiosity." In less generous terms, it's "putting your nose into everyone else's business." SOF operators are constantly learning. They don't know what they are going to need to know, so they just keep trying to learn everything. This isn't a casual interest in picking up new skills. This is a conscious effort on their part to be lifelong learners.

It is not unusual for a SOF professional to sit down and ask you everything there is to know about your job. They will come to you frequently with questions that you know don't directly impact them. And to some extent, you get the impression they are competing for your job. At the very least, this keeps you on your toes because anything you don't know, you'll have to find out. And they will hold you to it.

In SOF, there is no appetite for "that's not my job" because

the operational units are typically so small, each member of the team has to know their job and those of the rest of the team. They may not know your job well enough to do it themselves, but they'll have learned it well enough to ask the right questions and to find alternative sources should you be unavailable or no longer trusted.

Flexibility at its most basic is a thorough understanding of the mission and what will define success. It is the ability to understand the full range of skills or capabilities you may need to fulfill a mission and where you can learn, adapt, or acquire those capabilities.

When a Ranger is entering a compound, he may opt to pick the lock. Or he may attach plastic explosives to the door frame. Or he may choose to scale the wall and draw in through the skylight. He understands his mission is to get into the compound as quickly as possible to neutralize the threat. How he gets inside will depend on a number of variables for which he needs the requisite skills to mitigate.

For an ISR Air Commando, flexibility comes from knowing the supported mission inside and out. The decisions that are being made, when they are being made, and what products and coverage he or she can provide. Typically, the supported unit will ask only for those capabilities they are already aware of. They don't know what else is out there or how to articulate their needs. It is the ISR Air Commando, as the elite representative of their community, fully versed in all that they can provide, who can best fulfill those mission needs. Because they understand the mission at a fundamental level.

On the flip side, an ISR Air Commando also needs to know the jobs of all those who support them. The information they pull and turn into products for their supported unit or aircrew comes from other organizations. The SOF-minded ISR professional learns how that unit does their job, what their full capabilities are, and what they can provide even when that unit may not recognize those opportunities themselves. This ensures the Air Commando is getting the best support possible, in the manner most conducive to decision making, and in a timely fashion. And if one source fails to produce, they know the right questions to ask to find an alternate source of information or support.

Innovative (Creative)

More than any other attribute, the one to most clearly define special operations forces is "creativity," or as we would term it today, "innovative." Unfortunately, Dr. Spulak's explanation of this attribute leaves much to be desired:

"Creativity means the ability to immediately change the combat process, altering the way in which the tension is accommodated between threatening or performing destruction and avoiding it."

Despite the emphasis on the direct action, the notion of innovation and Dr. Spulak's further explanation of the concept, highlights the key factor that differentiates "conventional" and "unconventional" (and therefore special) forces.

Conventional by definition means "adhering to accepted standards" and "established by… accepted usage." By military standards, this refers to operating in a manner outlined in doctrine and training policy. US Army field manuals outline specific techniques for dealing with adversary fortifications, attempts at envelopment, and so forth. For close air support, pilots are expected to adapt to the dynamic situation of the battlefield, yet such volumes as Air Force Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP) 3-1 and 3-3 for the A-10, for example, provide the "accepted" tactics for weapons employment, multi-ship coordination over the target, communications

MQ-9 Weapons Crew (Photo courtesy of USAF)

with trained and untrained ground forces, etc. Conventional forces rely upon established tactics, procedures, and battle drills when encountering a limited array of predictable enemy actions. These are the "book answers" to common problems. While there will always be friction in war and variations in the specific tactical problem set, these variations are usually within range of the prescribed solutions.

This is not to suggest that conventional forces lack innovation or that planning staffs do not possess the capability to develop unique tactical solutions to complex problem sets. However, in the case of conventional forces, innovative leadership and planning is hampered by the need to tailor the execution of the mission to the average (or in some cases "lowest common denominator") Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine. Therefore, conventional forces are restricted largely to those skill sets, prescribed by established doctrine and TTPs, that have been trained to by their typical operator. SOF enables innovation through training opportunities for a more refined force, abbreviated resourcing efforts, and trust in individual ideas.

During planning for Son Tay, Gen Blackburn explained the key attribute which made Capt Knops so vital to the team. "[Knops was a] problem solver, he had a knack of foreseeing the problems and difficulties that could 'blow safe entry' and he came up with the logical ways to counter them." Knops was respected for his willingness to ignore rank and "to stand up and be counted any time." In SOF, innovation isn't about the next new shiny object but about utilizing the available tools, resources, and skills to overcome often times unprecedented problems.

Innovation is an inherent quality of special operations. The book answer to many solutions is to apply more force with more resources until the enemy succumbs. This is rarely, if ever, an available solution to the lighter and leaner SOF community. As has been attributed to Winston Churchill, "Gentlemen, we have run out of money. It is time to start thinking." SOF must be prepared to adapt old capabilities to new requirements, to think outside the doctrinal solution, and to execute in ways previously thought impossible.

An ISR Air Commando knows that the operators need full motion video of the target area in order to affect their planning. Understanding what decisions the teams need to make, when they will need to make them, and what level of detail they need drives the quest for new skills and resources. An Air Commando may be able to rely on traditional ISR platforms to produce the necessary feeds, or she may need to develop contacts with the host nation law enforcement agencies so she can tap into their closed circuit television network. Or, she may need to convince a sister Service intelligence team to use one of their platforms in a manner they had not considered before. All options are based on a thorough understanding of the mission and detailed study of the available capabilities.

Perhaps the easiest way to validate Dr. Spulak's argument is to examine scenarios in which the reverse has been demonstrated. And unfortunately, we have a very clear incident upon which to base this study, Operation EAGLE CLAW.

The attempted rescue of 52 American hostages from Iran in 1980 saw the creation of ad hoc joint task force including Army and Air Force special operations personnel and conventional Navy and Marine Corps personnel. In the former, we can see all of the attributes Dr. Spulak promotes. In the latter, a more conventional attitude toward the mission.

The Air Force professionals on the task force were truly elite professionals. The MC-130 pilots adapted NVGs for take-off and landing the C-130 within four hours of their acquisition. This was a feat which had earlier been considered as doctrinally impossible. They incorporated new technologies in the form of remote controlled IR strobes for the landing strip and developed new techniques for refueling aircraft at night in a forward, austere environment.

The Marine aviators, who took over from the Navy helicopter pilots, were to a large extent elite pilots in their own right. The notorious *haboob*, the sand storm through which they flew reduced visibility to zero. The pilots described it as looking out from the inside of a milk bottle. The temperature in their cockpits rose to over 100 degrees and yet they were still able to navigate their way successfully to Desert One, the austere air strip in central Iran.

However, these same aviators were unable to adapt the new navigation technologies offered by PINS (palletized inertial navigation system) and Omega navigation equipment. Nor were they able to effectively use their secure communications. Instead, they had planned to navigate using dead reckoning and to use light signals for communication. Techniques they were long experienced in, but proved wholly ineffective in the haboob. When technical issues developed in their helicopters, their lack of detailed understanding of this particular model of helicopter led to the unnecessary abort of at least one helicopter.

From the perspective of the ISR professional, the Marine intelligence officer supporting the helicopter crew similarly failed to adopt the SOF mindset. During a discussion with Chuck Gilbert, CIA air analyst, the Marine intelligence officer was warned that a CIA flight a month prior had detected radar emissions at an altitude of 3,000 ft. Despite analysis of the event determining these were spurious signals, likely from civilian ships in the area, the intelligence officer decided to leave nothing to chance. Concerned that Iranian coastal defense radars might be better than expected, he briefed his helicopter pilots they needed to stay below 100-200 ft in altitude all the way to Desert One or they "might blow the mission."

While there were operational radars along the coast, they were well away from the planned route of flight. It was determined that once the aircraft were past the coastal radars, they would have no other radar sites to avoid until they neared the Tehran area. This would have allowed the helicopters to fly the majority of the 400+ mile flight at altitudes of 5,000 ft. Even in the event that there was a true threat, the intelligence officer provided no information necessary for making decisions. The pilots could not have overflown the sand storm because they didn't know the field of view of the radar or its operating timelines. They had simply been provided the worst-case, bare minimum assessment of a radar threat that may or may not have existed. No consideration for the decisions they would need to make were taken. No other sources of information for cross-checking or confirming this threat information were sought.

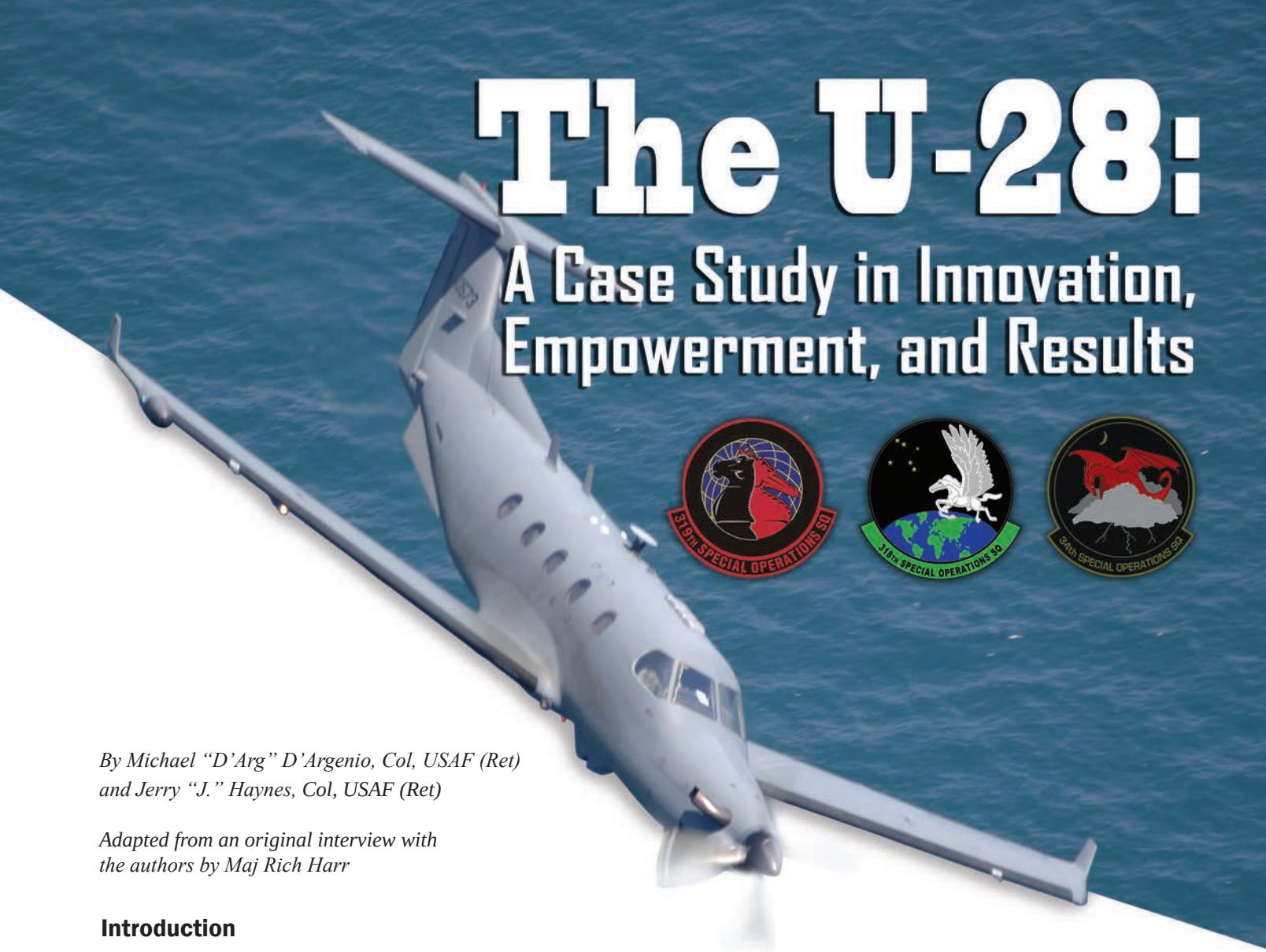
These lessons inform the development of today's ISR Air Commandos who are thoroughly integrated into the mission. They are experts in their operations and understand the missions they are executing and supporting. They deploy alone and unafraid to forward operating bases to support no fail air infiltrations. They instruct foreign partners in the development of intelligence analysis and the execution of ISR missions. In embassies around the world, AFSOC intelligence professionals provide liaisons to senior-level country teams and integrate with the national and international intelligence communities. From human intelligence to full motion video to signals intelligence, ISR Air Commandos deliver critical information to counter near peer threats, locate high value individuals of national interest, and enable sensitive missions around the globe.

Today's ISR Air Commandos are SOF. They are Elite — Flexible — Innovative.

About the Author: Col Stephen "BK" Price is the Director of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance for AFSOC, a USAF Weapon School graduate, and a former instructor at that illustrious institution. He was previously the Director of Intelligence at Special Operations Command Korea and managed all SOF ISR for Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan. He commanded the 820th Combat Operations Squadron of the 820th Base Defense Group at Moody AFB, GA, and was one of the Air Force's first ISR Liaison Officers, serving with the 1st Cavalry Division in Baghdad.

The U-28:

A Case Study in Innovation, Empowerment, and Results



By Michael "D'Arg" D'Argenio, Col, USAF (Ret)
and Jerry "J." Haynes, Col, USAF (Ret)

Adapted from an original interview with the authors by Maj Rich Harr

Introduction

By Donald Wurster, Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)
AFSOC Commander #8, 2007 - 2011

The U-28 story is truly one of the great examples of urgent need, rapid response, creative production, and human exceptionalism. In early 2005, there was a compelling requirement for additional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to support special operations. Actions on the battlefield focused on man-hunting and the mantra of find, fix, and finish was central to removing high value targets through direct action operations. Successful tracking and targeting of these individuals became the mission of the U-28 crews. The program was managed by the Big Safari program office, part of Air Force Materiel Command, and the contract to modify, and deliver the aircraft was awarded to Sierra Nevada Corp. The aircraft selected was the Pilatus PC-12, a rugged single engine turboprop with a cabin size that was big enough to hold the equipment and the crewmembers to operate it in combat. Aircraft were initially procured on the open market and came in a variety of paint schemes and configurations. Some of the aircraft were painted dark grey like military aircraft, and pictures of those airplanes were used in all the briefings and public displays, allowing the rest of the fleet to "hide in plain sight."

The mission equipment and cockpit configuration rapidly evolved through several iterations as crews and contractors adapted the systems to best accomplish the mission. Many of these improvements were developed and tested in-house by captains and majors empowered to act on intent. An organic research and development shop focused on desired effects and maximizing the aircraft's time on station. Weight was a critical factor since each pound impacted the functional mission time. Because of the U-28's low fuel consumption rate, each 300 pounds of weight we were able to cut increased the flight duration by an hour. In addition to finding the lightest weight equipment, the squadron also mandated a strict height and weight standard for the aircrews.

By the fall of 2006, the U-28s were the primary ISR platform supporting the assault forces. Those who carried the ball in the early days earned the respect of the supported forces because they made a difference on the battlefield. When reading this article, frame the dialogue with the SOF Truths and focus on how these Air Commandos achieved success by empowering their Airmen. "Any place, any time, any where."

Initial 319th SOS squadron members and its single contract maintainer with its first three slick PC-12 training aircraft in Nov 2005

Background

In 2005, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) identified a shortfall in airborne tactical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (T-ISR), caused in large part by the challenges the USAF was having fielding sufficient remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) such as the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper. US SOF had a validated requirement for more ISR orbits than current capabilities could fill. The decision was made to fulfill a portion of those requirements with a manned platform as rapidly as possible. This story shows how a joint team of Air Commandos were able to deploy the first two T-ISR aircraft into combat in less than nine months.

Early in the program, the team adopted the mindset of flexibility and determination—flexibility to overcome any obstacle placed before them and determination to support the ground forces to the maximum extent possible. Failure was not an option. Between 2006 and 2007, the 319th SOS grew from 6 to 14 aircraft, from 30 personnel to 150, and fielded both the Block-10 and Block-20 aircraft modifications. Thirteen years later, the men and women of the 319th, 34th, and 318th SOSs have employed the U-28 every day since its first combat sortie in June 2006. Today's Air Commandos continue to mature this very potent ISR capability in support of the ground force commanders.

While the story is based on the rapid fielding of a very capable weapon system, what it primarily illustrates is that AFSOC's strength is its people. What the U-28 team did is powerful evidence that people truly are more important than hardware.

The Idea

During the mid-2000s, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were focused on destroying the enemy's networks. GEN Stanley McChrystal was changing the way our special operators were taking on the enemy by exploiting target intelligence in real time to strike additional, subsequent targets that same night, sometimes even in a different country. What made this new operational paradigm work was dedicated, agile, and high-quality tactical intelligence fused with persistent surveillance.

When we got the call to create and deploy what became the U-28 weapon system, we realized we had some significant organizational obstacles to overcome. Those obstacles included the institutional mindset, even at AFSOC, that what we wanted (and needed) to do could not be done. It was not the way the Air Force, AFSOC, or USSOCOM did business back then. So, with support from our senior leadership, we broke a number of acquisition and organizational paradigms along the way.

The initial mission announced for the 319th SOS, the first U-28 unit to stand up, was tactical mobility. By 2012, though, the mission was publicly announced as tactical ISR. The requirement we set out to satisfy was for full spectrum manned ISR, i.e., full motion video (FMV), signals intelligence, and a robust communication suite, with maximum flight endurance. We were hoping for six to seven hours duration, but that proved to be a bit optimistic. And, our goal was to execute the program within six months.

To achieve the goal of having the manned T-ISR capability into combat within six months, AFSOC, the joint Aviation Tactics Evaluation Group (AVTEG) at Ft Bragg, NC (led by Lt Col. Fran Iwanski, Lt Col Troy "VB" Vanbemmelin, Lt Col Mike "Grace" Kelly, MSgt Jerry Kokes, and other fantastic experts in the ISR shop), the Big Safari Systems Group at Wright-Patterson AFB, OH (led by Col Kevin "Ducky" Hoffmann, Kim High and program manager, Don Miceli), and USSOCOM's Program Executive Office—Fixed Wing (PEO-FW) all collaborated to (1) define the ground forces' tactical ISR requirements, (2) evaluate aircraft and systems that would meet those requirements, and (3) rapidly field the capability. In project management one often hears that project success is based on three factors: cost, schedule (timing), and performance (quality). You can maximize two of them, but not all three. Because timing was the primary factor driving this project, we had to make compromises with cost and performance. Our process became one of asking what was commercially available and then what systems could be adapted for integration onto the aircraft, yet was sophisticated enough to meet strident mission requirements? With help from AVTEG to ensure the systems we were considering met or exceeded the acceptable performance standards, our goal became "an 80 percent solution fielded in six months."

While the aircraft and systems team was going through the throes of procuring, modifying, testing, and fielding the airplanes and electronics, the other half of the team was working the people side, defining the personnel requirements and then hiring and training the operators and support personnel. The AFSOC Director

319th SOS Plankowners including assigned naval flight officers, support operators, and contract maintainers during the squadron's first combat changeover in Aug 2006

of Operations, (then Col) Eric Fiel, tasked Lt Col Haynes, then the Chief of AFSOC Special Activities Stan Eval, to establish the initial mission essential task list. We rapidly put that together and he approved the first list for the U-28 on the spot. He then told us to front-load the squadron with pilots from AFSOC's major weapon systems. His intent was to ensure the new capability fully embraced the Air Commando mindset. Lt Col Haynes then let it be known that he wanted to be a part of that initial cadre (J. Haynes, Andy Moss, Andy Jett, Scott Mallory, Rob Lundy and Dave Cox). Meanwhile, Lt Col D'Argenio was in North Carolina and was told that he would be returning to Hurlburt to start a new ISR squadron from scratch as its first squadron commander. A short time later, he was told that Lt Col Haynes would be his operations officer and the squadron leadership team set about the mission at hand.

Training the Crews

The first challenge was getting the pilots qualified. AFSOC leased a few PC-12s, the civilian version of the aircraft, so we could get the pilots their basic flight qualification and instrument certification. We could also use the PC-12s for austere field landings and takeoffs, as well as night vision device (NVD) qualifications. We had to wait for mission training, though, until the U-28 was delivered. We were building the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and our experience base from the ground up. On top of that, there was disagreement as to who would provide the combat systems operators for the back of the aircraft. Specifically, the question was who would operate the full motion video (FMV) system?

Because weight had a direct impact on the station time available, our first thought was that the combat systems operators would fly in the right seat of the aircraft. This would negate the need for an additional human and workstation in the cargo compartment—potentially about 300 pounds of weight. Given that the commercial version of the airplane is rated for single pilot operations and the pool of available pilots was small, we made the pitch to qualify everybody to single pilot standards and fly the aircraft operationally with only one pilot. While the command agreed to qualify all pilots to single pilot standards, we were unable to change the AFSOC mindset that we needed a fully qualified second pilot in the right seat during tactical missions. We were required to fly with two AFSOC pilots in the front of the aircraft and had to build a full crew station in the back for the systems operator. That decision reduced our on station time from seven to six hours. Ironically, when the Block-20 aircraft was fielded two years later, control of the second sensor was placed in the right seat crew position…exactly where many of us had initially said it should be.

AVTEG worked through joint channels to quickly find system operators for us. The Navy at the time had excess naval flight officers (NFOs) and pilots because they were retiring some of their multi-place antisubmarine, anti-surface warfare, and strike aircraft. The experienced NFOs and pilots the Navy offered on a long-term basis were a tremendous addition to the squadron. The NFOs started their basic training before we had our first mission bird. To make up for that shortfall we sent them to the various vendors to get hands-on experience with the equipment and to become familiar with the systems that would eventually be integrated into the airplane.

The NFOs did a fantastic job bringing their expertise from a cross-section of platforms and missions: anti-submarine warfare, fleet defense, air superiority, and strike, to the 319th SOS. Each quickly grasped the importance of our mission and applied their various experiences to solve some of our technical challenges and refine our TTPs. Many of our current squadron traditions are the result of that joint flavor we had from the beginning.

In hindsight, the diversity of our crew force was invaluable. It worked as well as it did because that initial cadre focused on getting the right individuals into the unit. AFSOC reluctantly gave us the ability to select the initial members of the squadron, especially the aircrew. We defined our requirements in terms of background, physical fitness standards, body weight, flight hours, and experience. We interviewed each candidate to sort through their personalities, their attitudes, and their ability to operate in a dynamic and high operations tempo manner. We focused on getting the "right" person rather than getting the "best" person.

Initial crews were drawn from other platforms within AFSOC to imprint the new force with AFSOC culture and leadership philosophy. Then, crewmembers were imported from other weapon systems that were overmanned including the B-1, F-16, F-15, U-2, and

others. As the U-28 fleet continued to expand, an influx of new pilots fresh from pilot training was brought in to fill the new cockpits. Training these crews focused on the mission and steeping them in the AFSOC culture that "prudent audacity" was essential. That tone reflected a focus on commander's intent at all levels.

Embracing Innovation

One of the more innovative things we did in the squadron was to create a Combat Development Division (CDD). This was a union of tactical and technical expertise that was given the tools and the authorities to solve problems. We worked with USSOCOM PEO-FW to place a systems integration laboratory (SIL), replicating the mission equipment on the aircraft, in the squadron. The SIL became the incubator for upgrades to the mission computers, aircraft displays, datalinks, and aircraft configuration. Led by Capt Luke Savoie, the CDD was able to propose and try new ideas within the squadron before engaging with Big Safari and the contractor to determine if or how the changes could be implemented.

One example of how the CDD enabled a creative solution was when we changed the equipment and procedures to improve effectiveness and reduce the risk to force during vehicle interdiction missions. The procedure up to then was for the tactical operations center (TOC) to talk the helicopters onto the target by relaying what they were seeing on the video feeds. This was a difficult and sometimes confusing process. Our team realized that the video downlinks from our aircraft had excess capacity and capabilities that were not being used. By understanding exactly what the helicopter crews needed, when they needed it, and in what format, one of our smart software guys supporting the CDD (Capt Lou Pochet) created new code, tested it, and sent it to the crews downrange. The crews in theater tested the new software under operational conditions and recommended some changes. Within 48 hours of identifying an opportunity, mission-focused operators and engineers had created a new automated tool that significantly improved TTPs, reduced workloads for the helicopter crews, and helped to mitigate the risk in a dangerous special operation.

Another good example of the squadron's innovative and persistent spirit happened in 2006. When the U-28 was initially fielded, there were multiple, non-integrated laptops used for system operations. The crew could not quickly access information across multiple crew positions, though. In addition, the user interface for the ISR systems required more attention than the operator could manage during complex mission scenarios. The 80 percent solution we had initially accepted to get this T-ISR capability to the fight now needed adjusting. The guidance to the CDD was, "Don't limit yourself based on what you've seen or experienced in the past. Also, don't limit yourself based on what you think will get approved or funded."

The team did some research and identified several vendors offering near-term solutions that were already flight certified. They then figured out how best to adapt the systems, displays, and interfaces, zeroing in on balancing capability, certification, and installation. After briefing the operations group and wing leadership, we flew an aircraft to MacDill AFB, in Tampa, to show it to PEO-FW. After giving the staff a static display and explaining what we were

doing with the capabilities they had enabled, we put Col James "Hondo" Geurts, the program executive officer, into the right seat for a flight demonstration of a standard mission profile in the Tampa Bay area.

Once airborne, we mounted the hand controller for the sensor on his armrest, put the mission computer in his lap, and placed other tools necessary for him to do the mission around

Plankowners plaque listing the first crews (A-D Flights in each of the corners) along with Navy Flight Officers around the center patch (patch was designed and adopted by the original NFOs).

him in the cockpit. We then proceeded to run through a fairly routine scenario. We had him coordinate with the mission systems operator in the back of the aircraft, locate and track a target, provide data to the ground force commander, and coordinate with several other simulated aircraft providing fires, ISR, communications, and other support. As the scenario progressed, the extraordinary task loading became obvious. This was not an overly complicated mission, but it demonstrated what the aircraft and mission systems could do and also what they could not do because of the crew's task saturation.

When he asked if we did this on every mission, our answer was, "Absolutely. Every mission." At that point he realized we needed to upgrade the cockpit and the network, especially if we were to remain effective during the increasingly complex mission requirements being requested by the ground teams. Once we landed at MacDill AFB, Col Geurts discussed the proposed solution we had developed in the CDD. Over the next few months PEO-FW secured the funding and worked with all the stakeholders to obtain approval for the necessary modifications. The later, long-term result was the Block-20 U-28 with fully integrated avionics, communications, and mission systems, plus the addition of a second electro-optical and infrared sensor.

Empowering the People

One of the major intangibles that was key to our success was the culture of trust and empowerment we created in the squadron, and that was fully supported by AFSOC and the wing. Initially, the aircrews were worried about their left and right limits, and how far they could press. That's not an unfair concern given the litigious nature of American society today and the constant stream of news articles telling of how this officer, senior NCO, or team leader is being punished, relieved, or prosecuted. The urgency of our mission requirements, though, necessitated some extraordinary trust.

Our attitude was to push the limits as far as we needed for mission success, but to keep the command team informed. We found ways to eliminate or at least reduce barriers to change. People were encouraged to experiment and to be creative. As you can imagine, folks were skeptical at first. As the senior leadership at Hurlburt grew comfortable with what we were doing and with the professionalism of our crews, their attitude became, "is it safe and is it important … if so, then try it." Of course, humans can and will get out in front of their headlights on occasion. When that happened, the professionalism of the crews took over, the squadron leadership made a correction, and we learned from each instance.

The attitude of our people become one of pride, pride in the fact that relatively young officers and NCOs had the power to affect real change and enable mission success on the ground.

Conclusion

The Slayers of the 319th SOS created a legacy of excellence, flexibility, and determination during a challenging time in the history of AFSOC. New aircraft, new missions, and new bases were coming into the command. While exciting, it was also stressful. Through it all, the U-28 team stayed focused on the task — rapidly fielding dedicated tactical ISR for the teams on the ground who were taking on some of our nation's worst enemies. In less than nine months, from concept to combat, we had airplanes and crews overhead, giving the teams what they needed. The systems have evolved and the number of squadrons has tripled, but the U-28s continue to provide unparalleled tactical ISR to joint SOF commanders … Any place, any time, any where.

About the Authors: Col (retired) Mike "D'Arg" D'Argenio is a command pilot with over 7,000 hours (1,088 combat) experience in 9 different aircraft. He has combat time in the AC-130H over Somalia and Bosnia, combat time in the AC-130U over Kosovo and Afghanistan, combat time in the U-28A over Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as combat time in other special operations aircraft. Col. D'Argenio retired after 25 years of service in April 2013. He continues to serve in the defense sector working on innovative solutions for manned and unmanned aircraft systems.

Col (retired) Jerry "J." Haynes was the first DO and second commander of the 319th SOS and a member of the initial cadre for the PC-12/U-28A. He is a command pilot with nearly 5,000 flight hours, primarily in single and twin-engine turboprop special operations aircraft. He continues to support and defend the Constitution as a civil servant in the National Capital region. J. and his wife have two sons in college and twin girls in the home.

Lt Gen (retired) Donald Wurster was the 8th Commander of AFSOC. He is a command pilot with more than 4,000 hours in both special operations and combat rescue aircraft.

Standing up a Squadron WHILE IN COMBAT

By Gary 'Chainsaw' McCollum, Col, USAF (Ret)

Author's Note: Although I'm the "reporter," the story that follows describes the superhuman efforts of so very many Dragons and their spouses. This story of courage and tenacity in the face of severe adversity was "written" by the men and women of the 3rd SOS.

A pre-flight inspection of an MQ-1B Predator at Ali Base, Iraq. The Predator is a medium-altitude unmanned aircraft system. (USAF photo by A1C Christopher Griffin)

My family was two days out from our door-to-door move to Air War College when the AFSOC Vice Commander phoned me with news that the leadership wanted me to lead the stand-up and then command a special operations MQ-1B Predator squadron. "Pred-a-what, Sir," I asked. Like most people at that time, I had never heard of a Predator and had no idea what one did.

When I visited my new chain of command at Hurlburt Field to get information on how all of this was going to work, everyone from the group commander to the AFSOC Director of Operations told me the same thing, nearly verbatim, "Chainsaw, we're not exactly sure what you'll be doing or where you'll be doing it, but it's really important. Don't screw it up." Alrighty, then.

As I was to learn, the MQ-1B Predator was an armed, remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), approximately the size of a Cessna 172, that Air Combat Command (ACC) was flying to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and precision strike missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was the weaponized version of the RQ-1 Predator, designed and built by General Atomics in 1995 as a technology demonstrator for medium-altitude, long-endurance ISR. By 2005, it had been armed with the AGM-114 Hellfire laser-guided missile and was operating with a crew of two, a pilot plus an enlisted intelligence analyst trained as a sensor operator (SO). The "cockpit," which was housed in a shipping container consisted of two identical flight stations inside the ground control station (GCS). The crew was augmented by a mission intelligence coordinator (MIC) at a computer station inside a centralized operations facility, which also hosted communications, weather, and an instructor/evaluator pilot mission commander (MCC) who also served as supervisor of operations.

Because there was a communications time delay between control input and performance feedback while flying the Predator via satellite control, we needed a small, forwarded-deployed launch and recovery element (LRE) of operations and maintenance personnel who would launch the aircraft via line-of-sight control, then hand over control of the aircraft to crews in the US who executed the mission via satellite link. At the end of the mission, the LRE would again take control of the aircraft to land, rearm, refuel, and relaunch the Predator for its next mission. Keeping the majority of the Predator crew force in the US maximized the efficiency of the available manpower, since none of the traditional pre-deployment preparation, training, travel, or post-deployment recovery time was required. Predator crews were "deployed-in-garrison."

In early 2005, USSOCOM's dissatisfaction with both the quantity and quality of ISR support to SOF had resulted in an agreement between the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) and the commander of USSOCOM to expedite the formation of a dedicated AFSOC Predator squadron to provide more responsive and expeditionary ISR and precision strike to SOF. The revival of the 3rd SOS, most recently a gunship squadron in Vietnam where A1C John Levitow had earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, was underway.

Immediately after the CDR, USSOCOM/CSAF meeting, two AFSOC pilots were placed into the first available Predator training class at Indian Springs AAF, about 50 miles northwest of Las Vegas, NV (which later became Creech AFB), graduating in April 2005. One would remain at HQ AFSOC for a time as our sole Predator expert on the staff, and the other was Maj Peter "Pepe" Lehew, who would establish the 16th Operations Group detachment at Nellis AFB and become the first operations officer for the new squadron. Pepe, a prior MH-53 and HC-130 pilot, proved essential to the success of the squadron through his aggressive leadership, knowledge of technical systems, and as an "idea guy" for everything from how to enhance communication with our supported units to designing SOF-specific equipment for our unique mission sets.

AFSOC sent the first wave of four SOF-experienced NCOs and another four pilots to the subsequent formal training unit (FTU) class later that year. By the time I arrived in August, these nine Air Commandos were embedded within an ACC RPA squadron, flying the line in combat full-time while also charged with establishing every single program an AFSOC operations squadron is required to have, with limited higher headquarters expertise or assistance, and not even a chair or desk to call their own.

This was my challenge as a rather surprised new squadron commander. Fortunately, I had been a part of several highly effective units, as well as a couple not-so-great ones. I had tried to pay attention to my leaders, good and bad, and learn from them along the way. I realized early on that our squadron culture and identity could make or break our effort.

Shortly after arrival, I met with the other 19 plankowners of the yet-to-be-formed squadron, to discuss the challenges ahead and start setting the foundations for what we wanted our squadron to become. We agreed that we would reclaim the "Dragon" moniker from the Vietnam era, and solicited ideas for a new unit patch. The ACC leadership wanted us to wear the patches of our ACC host squadron, but we were Air Commandos and needed to establish and embrace our own unique identity even before the squadron was officially reactivated. Likewise, we considered a number of mottos to reflect the character of the squadron to be, finally settling on "Pro Patria, Pro Liberis" - For Country, For Liberty. I could think of no better call to arms.

The challenges of standing up the squadron were numerous and daunting. Every one of our Predator-qualified crewmembers was detailed to the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron (RS), our hosts. The rest of us, myself included, were attending the 4-month FTU at Indian Springs AAF. We were a collection of operators from disparate backgrounds, pilots and enlisted aviators from gunships, Talons, Pave Lows, HH-60s, Hueys, C-141s, AWACS, F-111s, and V-22s … gunners, sensor operators, flight engineers, even a navigator who held a private pilot's license and was therefore cleared to attend the Predator Pilot FTU. The thing we all had in common is that each of us had at least some special operations experience, we had all volunteered, and we knew we had the opportunity to make a positive difference for our SOF teammates forward and set the foundation for the 3rd SOS to be anything we were willing to make it.

Two of the most critical positions were Additional Duty First Sergeant, MSgt Eric "Tater" T, and Operations Supervisor, MSgt John "JJ" J. We couldn't have asked for better leadership from either one. Both of these men understood how important their role as the senior enlisted backbone of the squadron would be and fully embraced it. They cared for and mentored our younger and incoming Dragons, many of whom were first-term Airmen or junior officers new to SOF, teaching by word and deed what it meant to be a quiet professional and a Dragon, fully committed to our mission and our squadron family. When we finally gained enough personnel, Captains William "Mike" M. and Dave "Slacker" P. did the same as our first flight commanders.

I quickly realized we were blessed with an initial cadre full of hard-chargers and might spend as much or more time

reining them in as pushing them forward. More than once I'd catch a Dragon at work on one of their scarce "fully off" days trying to establish their specific squadron program(s) or doing other office work. I had to order them home. The last thing I wanted was the "home" part of our squadron family to be broken by the effort, and one of my greatest fears was that the sustained high ops tempo would lead to injury or worse due to chronic fatigue. (I may or may not have fallen asleep while waiting at the stoplight outside the Nellis main gate, more than once.)

While we might have had far too many demands for our limited time and energy, and had significant mental and emotional challenges from deploying and redeploying multiple times in a single day, I often asked the Dragons to compare our experiences to our forebears or those of our brothers and sisters deployed forward, to the challenges and sacrifices we faced within our squadron. Our lot in life might be difficult, but it didn't suck nearly as much as it did for a WW I soldier living in flooded trenches for weeks at a stretch under constant bombardment, who couldn't go home until he was dead, grievously wounded, or the war was won. Likewise, it didn't suck as much as it did for our brothers forward, who charged through enemy fire into unknown target compounds, potentially facing prepared ambushes or terrorists wearing suicide vests and hiding behind women and children. We, at least, were fairly unlikely to be shot at unless we visited the local department store at the wrong time of day.

Many of our early challenges were of the peacetime variety. The reception of our nascent squadron at Nellis AFB, the "Home of the Fighter Pilot," was not what one would call welcoming. Moreover, Nellis is a peacetime base. Even urgent, combat-driven needs were nearly always held to peacetime staffing, prioritization, and implementation timelines.

The ACC Predator community had been thrust into combat service with never-ending demands for "more and faster" since Day One. "Surge" was a word that had completely lost all meaning. Most of the personnel in RPAs at the time were non-volunteers, either no longer physically cleared to fly "legacy" aircraft or sent by their previous weapon systems' leadership to the "land of misfit toys" that was Predator. Many of the sensor operators were first-term Airmen straight out of intelligence analyst technical training. There was a small corps of professionals within the 15th RS holding operations together, including a cadre from the UK's Royal Air Force, but there were also far too many instances of unprofessional behavior. The squadron commander was forced to frequently hand out Articles 15 and Letters of Reprimand. The climate within that squadron was challenging at best.

Worse, the Predator crews back then had no idea whom they were supporting or why, nor did they receive any significant mission materials from the ground units. All they knew was that they were yanked from one target to the next by someone on the chat system, more often than not "yelled" at by the people at the other end, and subject to an accident investigation board and possible Flight Evaluation Board if they lost an aircraft in combat—which was quite easy to do with the Predator. Of much concern to us was the level of distrust between the 15th RS and the "customers" downrange. The 3rd SOS knew things had to change, as quickly as possible.

The 15th RS scheduling technique at the time was to throw the maximum number of available bodies at the daily schedule and let the MCC on shift sort it out. Rarely, if ever, did a particular pilot and SO fly as a crew more than a few hours on a given sortie/mission on a given day. The MICs were on a different schedule, entirely. Continuity on downrange missions was practically non-existent. Crew coordination remained at the most basic level. Any prebrief or debrief for a particular mission usually consisted of a few minutes' spin-up provided by the outgoing crew during "seat swap" in the GCS.

Predator landing. (Photo courtesy of USAF MSgt Robert W. Valenca)

The misuse of Predator Controllers forward was also highly problematic. These "Pred Drivers" were typically junior enlisted intelligence augmentees embedded at the supported unit's tactical operations center to coordinate between the SOF teams on the ground and the Predator crews at Nellis. It was a good idea poorly executed because they generally had no SOF or Predator experience, but they had the authority to tell the Predator crews where and how to employ their weapon system. Often the Pred Driver would steer the crews away from the objective area as the "hit" began, partly in an attempt to prevent the dissemination of SOF tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) on the objective. One of the war's most useful overhead assets was unnecessarily removed from the fight at the most critical times because the supported units on the ground didn't trust the supporting Predator unit.

The only dedicated training an RPA pilot or SO received at that time was during initial qualification training at the FTU. Within minutes of flying their first combat mission, a new pilot or SO could find themselves employing a Hellfire "danger close" to ground forces. Any development or refinement of new TTPs, and any crew certifications on new flight control software, for example, were accomplished during actual combat missions. Evaluations and upgrade training were likewise conducted in combat. This did not lend itself to effective or efficient training, or effective combat employment.

When a "legacy" aircrew deploys to a combat theater, it has a single chain of command and a single set of Rules of Engagement (ROE). In the RPA world, a crew could literally be employing an aircraft over Iraq under one set of ROE during

the first part of their day, fly a different aircraft in Afghanistan under different ROE later that day, and potentially move back and forth again a number of times during a single flight duty period. The crews had to know and follow multiple ROEs on any given day.

After the squadron activation on 28 Oct 2005, we started gaining personnel specialists, weather, maintenance, aviation resource management, intelligence, resource management, a flight surgeon, etc., - all valuable additions to the team and most on their first SOF assignments. Our first support Dragon was TSgt Dave "Angry Bunny" C, who was a godsend. "AB" may have been a personnelist by AFSC, but he quickly became the front office continuity and Jack-of-all-trades for our squadron, offloading tasks from the Dragon ops crews and helping the squadron's harried commander keep track of the hundreds of balls we had in the air. Shortly after came additional support Dragons who served well above their pay grades and well outside their areas of expertise.

For the FTU classes subsequent to mine, the 3rd SOS was promised four pilots and four sensor operators per class. Occasionally, AFSOC would send SOF-experienced personnel to the FTU predesignated to join our squadron. In most cases, though, we would have to compete with our ACC counterparts for the graduates at a "body board" chaired by the ACC group commander. I visited every FTU class to brief them about who the Dragons were, why we were there, and challenge them to volunteer to meet the high standards we expected of Air Commando Predator crews.

Just as crucial to the success of our squadron was the support of our Dragon spouses and "Dragon pups." The mental and emotional aspect of remote RPA ops is far from insignificant. When a Dragon came home from flying missions, he or she might have experienced 12 hours of mind-numbing reconnaissance on any of a number of targets of interest, or he or she might have just employed Hellfires "danger close" to friendly troops in contact or seen a SOF teammate meet their demise in full living color. These were things that, under traditional circumstances, an individual would have time to process and decompress from at the end of a normal combat deployment, but which a Predator crewmember had to carry into peacetime Las Vegas and the family home minutes after the fact. I've served in a more diverse range of units than most, but I've never seen a stronger or more dedicated group of spouses than we had at the 3rd SOS.

So, there we were, slowly growing, with an eye toward eventual SOF-organic operations, and owning no facilities, no aircraft, and no equipment. At first, all our Predator-qualified Dragons were more or less subsumed into the 15th RS, flying their lines just like their ACC counterparts, and working within the 15th RS shops that corresponded to their responsibilities in the 3rd SOS. This was far from optimal, but we were there first to learn.

We knew we had to improve the level of trust between the Predator crews and the SOF units they supported. It was extremely helpful that LTG Stanley McChrystal the commanding general of the primary supported units forward, was attempting to flatten his organization and open communication both within his units and with external teammates. He sagely noted that it takes a network to defeat a network, and directed his organization to open up and extend trust to external teammates to more effectively prosecute its high-priority mission. Amazingly, we convinced his organization to "read in" all operational Predator personnel, even the RAF contingent, to their classified programs so the crews would know who they were supporting and why. This permitted us to install terminals for the SOF organizations' internal classified network into our operations centers and GCSs, providing much more effective real-time communication and mission information sharing. Critically, it gave us the ability to talk securely to SOF team members on the ground during particularly crucial or time-sensitive operations.

We also encouraged those SOF units to visit our Predator crews at Nellis pre- and post-deployment so they could meet the people supporting them, improve their understanding of our operations, and provide constructive feedback on what we were doing well and how we could improve our support to their operations. Not all units took us up on the offer, but those that did acknowledged the value in doing so. Importantly, showing the Predator community who they were supporting and what specifically they had helped accomplish during

3rd SOS in January 2006. (Photo courtesy of author)

a supported unit's deployment exponentially boosted their morale and mission focus. Seeing the number and leadership echelons of the terrorist network they were helping remove from the battlespace was an enormous lift to the Predator crews who for so long had been kept in the dark. It's one thing to be told "good job," but it's an entirely different thing to have the supported unit show the extent of the terrorist hierarchy who had been killed or captured thanks in part to our efforts. Not all this happened at once or even quickly, but we eventually started to break through.

We deployed a Dragon liaison officer (LNO) to provide an on-site presence of SOF Predator expertise to the SOF task force commander and his staff, and to his subordinate units. Maj Jim "Rock" R, a former Talon pilot, educated the command teams on the new 3rd SOS and the Predator's capabilities and limitations, while stressing that we were fully focused on maximizing both the effectiveness and efficiency of our support to them, but we needed their help to make that happen. With professionalism and persistence, Rock and the Dragon

The PEOPLE
The AIRCRAFT
The SPIRIT of the AIR COMMANDO

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Submit files electronically to: info@aircommando.org. We use MS-Word. We also appreciate accompanying photos. Photos should be high resolution (300 dpi) and must indicate the source, have a release for use, and a brief description. If your submission is copyrighted, we will indicate that on the article.

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ACA

LNOs that followed gradually and continually improved the relationships and level of trust between our SOF teammates and the Predator crews back home.

Once we finally got enough pilots and sensor operators qualified and available in the squadron, we convinced the ACC leadership to let us schedule and control (SCHEDCON) one combat air patrol (CAP) as part of the overall CFACC taskings. By that time, our handful of qualified Dragon crews had added over 3,000 combat hours to the tally in the three and one half months since the squadron had been activated. We may not have had our own equipment or aircraft, or nearly enough intel personnel, but we could start to control our own scheduling and begin seriously working on improving the relationship with the SOF units we supported and developing specialized TTPs. Given that over 80 percent of Predator missions during that time were in support of SOF, ACC agreed that the Dragons' CAP would be dedicated to a SOF unit to the maximum extent possible. Our SCHEDCON line would retain the same callsign regardless of which AOR we operated within and the SOF units would know they had Air Commandos supporting them.

With SCHEDCON, we quickly standardized our daily and weekly flight schedule, simultaneously improving continuity on mission for our SOF brothers while also giving our crews a little more predictability and control over their personal schedules. To provide maximum continuity on mission while minimizing the length of the flight duty period, we developed a 6-shift-per-day plan that had each crew deliberately prebrief for

3rd SOS in March 2006. (Photo courtesy of author)

their specific mission, fly a continuous three hours, followed by a three-hour period for debrief, office work/lunch/workout, and re-brief, followed by a second three-hour "fly" period, debrief, and flight duties completed. Under this scheduling construct, almost every Dragon would have time during the normal Nellis duty day to conduct business on base at some point outside of his/her flight duties within a more normal 12-hour duty day and apart from the mandatory 12-hour crew rest period.

Shortly after we established our first Dragon CAP, someone decided we had reached manning levels sufficient to operate two CAPs under 3rd SOS SCHEDCON. This was far from the case as we barely had the number of pilots for sustained operations of one CAP, and even fewer sensor operators and mission intel coordinators. But the powers-that-be at higher headquarters had already agreed without consulting the squadron. We let our headquarters know the ramifications, saluted smartly, and marched forward. To protect continuity of support as much as possible, we retained our six shifts per day schedule, but extended each flight duty period to four hours on, two hours off, and four hours on. Although this meant that we had to switch crews between CAPs once a day, it still provided a little time for deliberate brief and debrief, preferably with the supported unit, maximum sustainable time on station at a single stretch, and mutual support between the squadron's crews throughout the 12-hour duty period.

The SOF units noticed the difference in engagement between the crews that had previously been supporting them and the Dragon crews flying our dedicated CAPs. The Dragons aggressively encouraged the supported units to share mission information and intelligence so we could more effectively employ the Predator on their behalf. Our intelligence team diligently pursued information and developed materials to fully brief our crews on the missions they supported. They constantly fought for post-mission feedback and results. In conjunction with leadership engagement, LNO efforts, crew-to-ground team interactions during the mission, and the intel team's dogged professionalism, we slowly built a better working relationship and level of trust with the supported units. Slowly, we changed the paradigm from Pred Drivers micromanaging our crews to letting the Predator crews best employ their weapon system to achieve now-shared mission objectives. Not only did this increase our operational effectiveness, it relieved the teams on the ground from "driving" our aircraft via the Pred Driver (now more accurately dubbed the Pred Tactical Coordinator), because their Dragons were on the mission and had their backs.

Soon, SOF units began specifically requesting the 3rd SOS to provide their armed overwatch. One specific instance caused considerable consternation for the CFACC. One of our nation's most elite SOF units messaged the CFACC and ACC's Predator Operations Center that "This mission is our highest priority. We want the [Dragon] line on it." The CFACC's response was that the request would be handled like all others and that they would assign the proper crew to support as they deemed appropriate. The supported unit was insistent, "Maybe you didn't hear us. We want the Dragons." Needless to say, that didn't sit well with other Predator units, but it served as a very clear message for me and the Dragons that we were doing something right. I still smile at the memory.

Shortly after that event, our squadron flew both our CAPs surveilling over a dozen points of interest to develop pattern-of-life intelligence on one of the most senior leaders in the Al Qaeda in Iraq terror network. For nearly two months, we intensely and unceasingly stared at these locations, hoping they would lead us to positive identification of the individual in question. Finally, we saw the right triggers, and Dragon crews, along with others in "manned" platforms, flawlessly tracked a single individual through heavy traffic and deliberate vehicle swaps to the high value target's location. Though our Dragon crews were ready (and probably best postured) to immediately strike the target, the command chain decided to call in a pair of F-16s to drop munitions on the target. I was at home in crew rest at the time, but my DO phoned and merely said "We got him." Yes, it was definitely worth it.

ACC brought in a new commander to lead the 15th RS, and he was nothing short of a miracle worker. Lt Col Christopher "Sponge" P was an A-10 driver by trade. He had served with SOF and had volunteered to come to Predator because he had seen first-hand how dysfunctional the RPA community was and

1st Anniversary Dragon Dining Out. (Photo courtesy of author)

he wanted to help fix it. Sponge and I immediately hit it off. His focus on the mission and fixing his broken squadron mirrored our Dragons' emphasis on improving the Predator community as a whole. Within a matter of few months, the 15th RS had turned the corner, transforming into a professional, mission-focused organization. The 15th RS, 3rd SOS, and our ANG partners truly became one team in the same fight. Together, we shared and improved TTPs, bolstered trust, and standardized and improved our operations.

Despite the objections of both Sponge and myself, and the dramatic recent across-the-board improvements within the whole of the Predator community, higher headquarters decided to accelerate the standup of SOF-organic full operational capability by over two and one half years. At 0315L Nellis time on 31 May 2007, the 3rd SOS "absorbed" six in-flight CAPs and two LREs, along with a large number of personnel, reducing the 15th RS to a skeleton and nearly doubling the size of the 3rd SOS overnight.

The leadership challenges of absorbing such a large number of people into our squadron – many of whom had earlier named themselves as non-volunteers to come to the 3rd SOS – and inculcating the culture, mission focus, and quiet professionalism of SOF while keeping the superb climate of "family" within the squadron were daunting. Along with the First Sergeant, I visited each of the "dumpsters" (our nickname for the GCSs) and the personnel within our newly-acquired Dragon Ops Center and personally welcomed them to the Dragon family. We kept the pomp and circumstance intentionally low, as we did not want anyone getting the impression we were gloating because we had "stolen" everything from ACC as had been feared two years prior. We had to bring these new Dragons into the fold and convince them they were valued members of the family just as much as any other Dragon.

Unfortunately, my change of command was later that same day. The foundation built by those first RPA Dragons was solid, though. Dragon leaders of all ranks and specialties continued to successfully introduce new people and additional capabilities to SOF. But that is a part of the story best told by others.

The 3rd SOS was reactivated in October 2005 and immediately began flying combat operations. In the first full year we flew a staggering 12,000 flight hours with an average manning of just over a dozen mission crews. The following year, the Dragons shattered that record. Dragons ... Pro Patria, Pro Liberis!

About the Author: Col (retired) Gary "Chainsaw" McCollum served as the inaugural commander of the most recent reactivation of the 3rd Special Operations Squadron. He commanded at the detachment, squadron, group, and JSOAC levels, and his final assignment was as Director of Special Operations and Personnel Recovery on the Air Staff. He is a command pilot who served as an instructor or evaluator in the F-111F Aardvark, T-38 Talon, MC-130H Combat Talon II, V-22 Osprey, and MQ-1B Predator.

An Air Commando Spouse's Perspective: 3RD SOS STANDUP

Author: Ranee McCollum with family in May 2007.
(Photo courtesy of author)

By Ranee McCollum

Gary got the call on a Friday. He'd had two days' notice that something might be up with his assignment. He got off the phone and explained the situation.

I said, "They want you to do what? Where? WHEN? And what the heck is a Predator?"

I'd been a military spouse for 18 years at that point, so getting yanked around like that wasn't new, but the late notice and the sheer scope of the change was disconcerting. The packers were scheduled to arrive Monday to move us to Maxwell AFB for Air War College and a break from what I naively assumed was a fairly duty-heavy assignment with the Marines and the MV-22 at Marine Corps Air Station New River, Jacksonville, NC. We had already rented a house in Montgomery. We had already forwarded the mail.

The movers showed up on Monday anyway. I think they had Gary's new orders before he did.

It started to sink in. Gary would be a squadron commander. This made me... the wife of a squadron commander.

Oh, dear.

Gary had been a weapons systems officer in a fighter squadron, an instructor in a training squadron, chief pilot in an MC-130 squadron, had a year at school with the Army, and six years in the Osprey with the Marines. Over the years I had attended innumerable squadron coffees, squadron parties, and squadron whatever-was-there-to-attend. Less often, I went to the occasional base-wide Officer's Wives' Club meeting (I think it was still the OWC at that point, but honestly, I paid little attention. I was one of those wives who showed up for Crystal Bingo and not much else.) I had tried my best to stay out of any position of real responsibility. I was generally fully supportive of Gary's career, and (with a little notice) I actually liked moving around and the military way of life, but I had no desire to be in charge of anything.

Worse, I'd had a taste of being "the first lady" as someone wittily put it, and I wasn't that great at it (yes, they said that, too). For the previous three years, Gary had been the detachment commander for the little contingent of Air Force within the larger Marine V-22 test team, first at Naval Air Station Patuxent River and then at Marine Corps Air Station New River. The Air Force had seen fit to send us to the AFSOC Squadron Commanders' Course, but at some point, I think I just blocked it all out. It was just a detachment, after all, is what I told myself, very small, with experienced military wives, and they didn't need me to write a newsletter or hold their hands. The guys weren't even flying for most of the time.

After two years at NAS Patuxent River, we moved back to MCAS New River, and the larger Marine Corps spouse network took over. The Marines have an emphasis on serious spouse involvement, and thanks to them I went to my first Key Spouse course, not entirely of my own volition.

I still couldn't have told you who Gary's group commander was, let alone his wife's name.

The 3rd Special Operations Squadron (SOS), Las Vegas, NV, would be geographically separated from the 16th Operations Group, Hurlburt AFB, FL. The significance of this distance did not impact my thinking at first, because between Command and General Staff College at Ft Leavenworth and six years of being stationed on Navy/Marine bases

with the V-22, being geographically separated from the Air Force was normal. But we were not at school, where such things didn't matter, and we were no longer with the Marines, who were inclined to subsume all things in their path. The 3rd SOS would be more or less on its own, on a sometimes unwelcoming and suspicious base, whose leadership was not entirely happy to have us there. We took up space. We wanted things. We didn't fit in.

Our top cover was 2,000 miles and two time zones away.

All of this sunk into my brain as some sort of...challenge.

The 3rd SOS hadn't even officially stood up yet, but it had 20 active duty Airmen, and 16 of them had wives. And if any of them were feeling like I was - dropped into the desert with no warning and little support - we needed to get ourselves together, first so that we retained our sanity, and second so that a support system would be in place as the squadron grew. I am sure someone would have taken over if I hadn't, but that's not the way the Air Force hopes to do things.

3rd SOS Plankowner picnic in September 2005.
(Photo courtesy of author)

Tracey Alsid - yes, I learned the group commander's wife's name! - told me that AFSOC tries to recruit leadership teams (this was an "oh, crap!" moment) and that if nothing else, I, as the commander's wife, had the ability to go to my husband and say, "Hey, here's what we need, can you help?"

Thanks to the AFSOC Squadron Commanders' Course, the Marines, and, as far as I can tell, osmosis from simply showing up to stuff, I had an idea of how to start.

All of those vast and varied assignments and associated social events had taught me that there were many ways to organize and run a wives' club or social network or support system, some better suited to certain situations than others. Tracey had said that it was up to us to figure out what form our spouses' group would take.

Very early on, the 3rd SOS spouses and I decided that we would not separate the enlisted and officer spouses for coffees. Our husbands worked literally side by side for hours on end; there was no point in having two wives' groups. Secondly, I refused to charge dues. I wanted our group to be a support system, not a club. And thirdly, and most controversial, every spouse that came into the squadron got a token – a little charm with the squadron's "3 Dragon" on it, whether or not they ever showed up to a coffee or a party or anything at all. My thought was that every wife was supporting her husband (all our couples were active duty husbands with wives at first) from home, whether or not she could ever find the energy or time to come chat with the other ladies once a month. This required some fund-raising, and thus the controversy as we didn't charge dues and usually if you don't pay you don't get a gift. But we developed and sold t-shirts, plastic tumblers, and blankets with the squadron patch or Dragon designs, and that covered it. Gary and I hosted a welcome picnic every month to which every new member of the squadron, plus spouse and kids, were invited, and I'd hand out the charm and a New Spouse packet and invite the new spouses to the coffees in person. We had coffees once a month, and I put out a newsletter on a regular basis. We all had each others' emails and phone numbers. We threw holiday parties, Easter egg hunts, and 4th of July BBQs. Because the guys worked holidays, many of the wives volunteered to make meals and take them into the squadron so that the day was still special for those Dragons on shift.

After about a year - probably the first time Gary could afford to leave the squadron for a week - AFSOC saw fit to send Gary and me back to Command Leadership School. We made jokes about how the first time didn't take, or that we needed remedial training - but jokes aside, I paid a lot more attention the second time around. I also discovered that I had a great deal more to say.

As the 3rd SOS gained personnel, one of the biggest challenges - for both Gary and me - turned out to be how to meld people from all the various backgrounds together. The 3rd had people from practically every major command in the Air Force, SOF and non-SOF, jets and props and helicopters, weather and intel and Star Wars and Star Trek - well, you get the idea. We were diverse.

I think it was only a couple of months after we got there that Gary said to me, "I think I understand now why they picked me." He'd had assignments in four different airframes by that time. We had been assigned to several, wildly different, military communities. They all taught us something. But all those communities - fighters, Spec Ops, Army, Marines - think they are special. And they are special, in different ways. So I thought, "Hey! We've got a bunch of special people here, and we are a brand new thing. Let's leave the normal rivalries at the door and be special RPA wives!"

Not everyone understood what I was after, and it caused some conflict as the

squadron and the number of wives grew.

One of the things I had avoided, in my years of just showing up/not being responsible, was drama. If there was drama in a wives' club, I left. That was the easiest thing to do, but perhaps not the wisest, as when there was drama amongst the disparate 3rd SOS wives, I did not have the experience to handle it with finesse. I handled it, actually, with a battle axe, and I regret that.

For the most part, though, especially in the first 18 months, we were a tight-knit group. We understood, if nothing else, that we were all in this together. What was harder was wrapping our heads around what "this" was: this new type of air power, what it meant for our husbands, and what it meant for us.

It was - and is - difficult to explain to anyone outside the RPA community that your husband was not just playing video games all day. That, no, he wasn't being shot at, but he was supporting the war effort 24/7/365, and yeah, it kind of really sucked, actually, and that, no, you weren't out having a blast in Vegas all the time.

Ah, Vegas! The wives generally came in with already-formed opinions: mostly, they hated it. Some wives went the entire assignment hating Las Vegas. Sometimes they hated it because they'd loved the previous assignment so much, they couldn't give Las Vegas a chance. Sometimes it was because Las Vegas made itself hard to love; it is not a military town the way some towns are: there were literally Las Vegas residents who didn't know Nellis Air Force base existed in their city, let alone Creech AFB, up to the northwest. And sometimes the glitter of Las Vegas just didn't make up for the gang tags, the police presence at every department store, and the stress.

I think the words "at least he can come home at night" might have done more damage to morale among the wives of the 3rd SOS in the first year of its existence than anything else. Because yes, he did come home, although not always at night, because ops were 24/7, so he might come home in the morning, or the evening, or sometime unexpected. He came home at odd times, slept at odd times, and ate at odd times. We couldn't count on the timing for more than a few days, if that, because in that first year the "schedule" was pretty much a work of fiction. We couldn't plan anything. Family dinner? Very funny. Piano recital? He'd try. Help with homework? Maybe I can hire a tutor.

He came home exhausted, because although flying shifts were no longer than 12 hours long, a non-flying day could last much, much longer. More than once I saw Gary literally fall asleep with food in his mouth.

He came home cranky, or distant, or both, generally for reasons he wouldn't, or couldn't, explain.

Was it because he watched a brother in arms get blown up today and couldn't help? Was it because he, himself, blew someone up?

For the guys, it wasn't just the ops tempo, it was the ops tempo plus having to invent the squadron from square one. It was the paperwork, the bureaucracy, the relationship-building with the host base, and the supported units on the other end. I can remember Gary giving pep talks to the squadron - you're doing great, this is hard, but we'll do it! - and the next moment calling desperately up the chain for someone with more authority to HELP, we're at the end of our strength here.

They had very little energy left for family.

As the squadron settled in, we wives began to understand that this assignment was unlike any other. The fact that our husband was home once in every 24-hour period gave way to the realization that it didn't necessarily mean that he was "home" in any real sense of the word. If the dishwasher broke, it was still yours to deal with, because if he was in the "Dumpster" (in those days the Ground Control Stations were housed in cargo shipping containers) you couldn't talk to him for probably hours, and even if you could get in touch, he didn't have the mental capacity to make a decision. If you had an appointment that day but the kids woke up sick, he couldn't stay home with them, because there was literally no other person to cover his shift. When he was home, he was probably sleeping - and on a one-hour recall in case he had to cover for someone who suddenly couldn't fly the line that day. It was very much as though he were deployed, except that you still had to feed him and do his laundry and try to reintegrate him into your family every few weeks or so, when the shifts changed and he was home when the rest of the family was.

"We got a new dishwasher?" he'd ask. "When did that happen?"

A few members of the 3rd deployed forward in three-month rotations, but for the most part, yes, he came home. It was hard to explain to anyone outside the RPA community why this wasn't always a helpful thing. You still wanted to be with him - and have your kids be with him - as much as possible, so you rearranged your life to accommodate his. Because the mission came first.

When the mission comes first, family doesn't. It can't.

I finally heard a senior leader say that out loud, a few years later. He was apologetic, and he acknowledged the importance of families. But he was right, and it was a relief to hear it without the usual sugar-coating. There is no comfort in being told you are the most important thing when actions don't back it up.

There might be a balance, depending on the mission, the manning, and the timing. At school, it's all about family. A particular military member might be able to turn down an assignment in deference to his or her family. A particular squadron might have enough downtime that everyone can be home on weekends. But in the end, the mission HAS to come first.

It's true on a large scale - that's what the military is for, after all. And it is likely true, especially for career military, on a very personal scale: you, as a spouse, are second to the mission.

Understand that fact, my fellow military spouses, and you will understand just how strong you have to be.

For me - and I think for most of the 3rd SOS wives, eventually - it was the mission that made the sacrifice worth it, once we understood it. Gary knew - possibly because I told him, over and over - that a little acknowledgement went a long way. He wrote personal notes, signed and sent birthday cards to all the spouses and all the kids, but a little truth went even farther. He took that to heart. I can't say that he found a balance between family and mission - the scale was

seriously and necessarily weighted in the mission's favor at the 3rd SOS - but he tried to answer the "why," which was pretty much the start to all our questions. He talked to the spouses as often as he could and encouraged us to talk back. He explained to us, as far as he could, why the hours were so long, why the shifts were always changing, and why your spouse had to work on Thanksgiving. Thanks to him, we knew that the mission - this military mission that was taking over even our civilian lives - was essential, and that the 3rd SOS was making a difference to their brethren on the ground. We were proud of them. We were proud to support them. We wanted to smack the people who thought that an RPA assignment was easy. We knew it wasn't.

I asked a few of the original 3rd SOS wives if they would like to contribute to this article, and Sasha took me up on it. Here is what she wrote to me:

> My first coffee was at your house and it was so soon after our arrival that we were still living in TLF! At some point, Chainsaw came out to address the spouses. He talked about the importance of what our husbands were doing and he didn't sugar-coat it. I appreciated his directness and not being "protected" from the truth. I left that night knowing that not only was Mike making a difference but that I could make a difference from home, too!
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> Of course we all know the hours were awful, but Mike working nights was the worst. It was hard being at home and trying to keep Grace quiet so he could sleep. He was upset because he was tired. I was upset because I felt what was expected of me was impossible. Neither of us felt appreciated. I had so many thoughts wishing he would just get deployed because it would be so much easier. Then the guilt kicked in for wishing him to be gone. I never said it to anyone for fear of judgment or sounding selfish - but at a coffee another wife said out loud what I'd thought so many times before. It made me feel normal. It made me feel not alone. And it made me super proud of her vulnerability. I was changed after that day, knowing it was okay to speak my truth in front of these women. I wasn't going to be judged, because every one of them was going through the same thing I was.
>
> I loved the spouses' group so much. Yes, Mike was deployed a lot. Yes, he was working a lot when he was home. But it was the tight-knit group of spouses that got me through it. I wasn't a fan of Las Vegas or his work schedule, but 10+ years later I look back on our time there with happiness because of the people around me. I'd go back and do it all again in a heartbeat!
>
> - Sasha

The words "At least he can come home at night" can still produce, in me, rage, guilt, and depression, all in the space of about 10 seconds, because I know how hard it was. I know how hard it is to explain. And I know, because I'm still having the conversations all these years later, that people who haven't been through it still don't understand.

To those spouses who are still living it: We hear you. We get it. Hang in there.

About the author: Ranee McCollum is a published author and the wife of Col (Ret) Gary "Chainsaw" McCollum. Together, they helped establish the 3rd Special Operations Squadron at Nellis AFB, NV. She is a veteran of 19 moves in just under 30 years.

2nd SOS

Citizen Air Commandos with a 24/7/365 Mission

Editor's Note: Last names of 2nd SOS personnel are withheld for security reasons.

By Maj Amanda Reeves, 919th Special Operations Wing Public Affairs

From a non-descript building on Hurlburt Field, FL, a group of Air Force Reserve Citizen Air Commandos carry out a unique 24/7 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) mission for Air Force Special Operations Command. As part of the Air Force Reserve's only special operations wing, the 2nd Special Operations Squadron (SOS) operates the MQ-9 Reaper in support of warfighters across the globe. Executing a unique mission for the Reserves, the 2nd SOS has overcome great obstacles and proven itself to be a lethal force on the battlefield.

Boasting a unit legacy and heritage dating back to 1917, the 2nd SOS has provided ISR to commanders and warfighters since World War I. Then, they were the US Army's 2nd Balloon Squadron, using observation balloons over the battlefields of France to help commanders on the ground identify enemy composition, positions, and movements. Although the unit has been de- and re-activated several times in the last century, since March 2009, the 2nd SOS has delivered consistent, timely, and accurate ISR support and capabilities to the greater special operations enterprise.

In its current form, the 2nd SOS was initially activated to operate the MQ-1B Predator at Nellis AFB, NV. Five years later, in 2014, the unit was hit with two major changes simultaneously: changing platforms to operate the MQ-9, and moving to Hurlburt Field, FL. "We didn't miss a single day of operations," said a 2nd SOS senior intelligence officer. "What's even better is the majority of our people chose to move with us as well. That's rare in the Reserves."

Indeed, most things about the 2nd SOS are rare in both the Reserves and the Air Force in general. Many traditional AF Reserve units are hindered by restraints on their manning and resources – it is often difficult to support a non-stop mission with people who are only present a total of one month per year. The 2nd SOS, however, has been blessed with a cadre of people who are dedicated to their mission and consistently go above and beyond the minimum requirements.

"Being a part of AFSOC, we're on the leading edge of the weapon systems coming out," said the 2nd SOS superintendent, a senior enlisted member assigned to the unit. "We're always using the newest software and executing the newest capabilities. This requires constant training, and most of our traditional Reservists are working 120 plus days per year."

As an AF Reserve unit, the 2nd SOS has been able to take advantage of the diversity of its Citizen Air Commandos by tapping into their varied experiences.

Maj Gen Vincent Becklund, the deputy commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, congratulates members of the 2nd SOS, marking both their 10th anniversary since being re-activated and their achievement of 100,000 flying hours. (Photo courtesy of 919th SOW/PA)

"Our diversity makes stronger," said Lt Col Brian Diehl, 2nd SOS commander. "It provides strategic depth, and more importantly, it makes us lethal. The mighty 2nd SOS is stitched together with seasoned Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marine, National Guard, and Regular Air Force veterans. We have seen it, we have done it, and we are ready for more!"

In addition to bringing a wealth of knowledge, the 2nd SOS's composition allows it another strategic advantage—every member of the unit is a volunteer who wants to be there and is completely dedicated to the mission.

In a recent command climate survey, respondents had a 97 percent job satisfaction level, with a 94 percent commitment rate. Satisfaction levels that high are nearly unheard of in any work environment, let alone in the Remotely Piloted Aircraft or RPA enterprise, which has historically been plagued by resiliency issues.

For the mission, this translates to incredible longevity and expertise in the 2nd SOS. On average, the unit's pilots, sensor operators, and intelligence coordinators each have approximately 3,000 flying hours under their belts. In a recent ceremony, the squadron marked both its tenth anniversary since being re-activated and its achievement of 100,000 flying hours.

Maj Gen Vincent Becklund, the deputy commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, spoke at the ceremony and highlighted the squadron's contributions to the AFSOC mission. "To be great, a unit needs three critical things: professionalism, technical proficiency, and esprit de corps," said Becklund. "The 2nd SOS has all three in spades. You truly are a great unit."

The 2nd SOS works around the clock to support AFSOC's global operations. Since 2009, it has operated in every named operation in which the US has been engaged, encompassing six different areas of operation (AOR). The resulting intelligence from thousands of different targets assisted in countless raids and detentions, while also neutralizing numerous high-value individuals wishing to do the US harm.

"You are a critical part of our team," said Gen Becklund. "I have never once heard someone say that a mission was so critical that they would rather not have the 2nd SOS handle it."

As an integral part of the Total Force, the 2nd SOS has also supported its active duty counterparts in untraditional ways. In 2017, when its sister unit, the active duty 65th Special Operations Squadron, underwent its own move, the 2nd SOS mobilized to support the move to ensure operations did not stop. Once the move was complete, the 2nd SOS continued to provide intelligence support for nearly a full year. Additionally, the 2nd SOS runs the operations center for both the Reserve and active duty components at Hurlburt Field. Since they opened in 2014, they have never closed their doors and have maintained steady-state, 24/7/365 operations. "This unit works so seamlessly with the active duty component that I would never know you were a Reserve unit if you didn't tell me — you're that good," said Gen Becklund.

That professionalism and expertise is a direct result of each member's dedication to the mission. The squadron is comprised of a mix of full-time Active Guard Reserve positions and traditional Reservist positions. Significant system upgrades occurring every six months and the mix of full-time and part-time schedules require true personal commitment to stay proficient.

"Our traditional Reservist crew members come in, and with minimal spin-up are ready to fly any mission in any AOR," said a senior master sergeant assigned to the unit. "It might be a new system, it might be a new AOR. It's a really

unique and challenging situation for us, but our people thrive."

In October 2018, the 2nd SOS demonstrated just how good they are when they faced a Category 5 hurricane head-on. Projected to make landfall just 80 miles east of Hurlburt Field, Hurricane Michael was the first Cat 5 to hit Florida since 1992. The storm's rapid change in intensity forced the 2nd SOS to act quickly, informing numerous global players of the situation, ensuring troops on the ground had the critical air support they required thousands of miles away, and keeping local crews safe from the storm's path in Florida.

The 2nd SOS operations center remained operational throughout the storm to coordinate aircrews and missions and to maintain personnel accountability. For safety, they moved to minimum manning, and for about 48 hours, the operations center was manned by the unit's commander, senior intelligence officer, flight operations supervisor, and senior mission intelligence coordinator.

The hurricane ride-out crews served as a hub of communication between several interested wings, squadron members and their families, and the deployed controlling agencies. In addition to command and control duties, the ride-out crew also ensured generators and air handlers operated at full capacity in order to protect the irreplaceable computer servers and equipment required to operate aircraft halfway around the world. The squadron's leadership carefully monitored the storm's path, weighing the decision of whether or not to evacuate. This was as close as the 2nd SOS had come to ceasing operations since it relocated to Hurlburt Field in 2014. Once the hurricane's path shifted slightly to the east and the squadron had 100 percent accountability, the operations center returned their focus to their normal operations, recalling aircrew and flying combat missions again.

The 24/7/365 no-fail mission of the 2nd SOS persisted, despite the threat from an unpredictable hurricane, because its people believed in it and committed to uphold it. The unit's members make those same decisions day-in and day-out, providing continuous, superior support to the nation's warfighters on the ground.

To ensure the fast pace doesn't take a toll on its people, the 2nd SOS works closely with its wing's Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) representatives. They hold monthly family events for the members and take resiliency seriously from the moment each member is gained to the unit.

We address the nature of our mission in our initial interviews," said Diehl. "Everyone who comes here knows what to expect and has decided this is what they want to do. I think that, combined with the exceptional support we receive from POTFF, is why we have such a high job satisfaction rate."

A technical sergeant assigned to the 2nd SOS conducts training in the RPA simulator at Hurlburt Field, FL. (Photo courtesy of 919th SOW/PA)

Looking to the future, the 2nd SOS has no intention of slowing down and is eager to meet its next milestones. "Make no mistake: while looking forward, we will remain fully engaged in our current fights," said Diehl. "We will leverage all of our experience to lead our community, not only in restoring our near peer proficiency, but in expanding the envelope of capability."

About the Author: Maj Amanda Reeves is an Air Force Reserve public affairs officer augmenting the 919th Special Operations Wing. Prior to her role in the Reserve, she spent nine years active duty with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and had several opportunities to support the Special Operations community in AORs across the globe.

ISR in Africa:

One JSOAC's Challenges

By Col Lance Schmidt, Commander, and the JSOAC-Africa ISR Team

It is no secret that Africa is home to some of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups: Boko Haram operates in Central Africa, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb is in much of West Africa, the Islamic State has moved to North Africa, and Al Shabab keeps East Africa in turmoil.

There's an old adage in the SOF command & control (C2) world, "If you've seen one JSOAC, you've seen one JSOAC." For most Air Commandos, the Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) is a relatively unknown or misunderstood organization. Joint doctrine allows joint special operations component commander to designate JSOAC commander to control SOF aviation across a theater operations. For special air operations in Africa, the commander of Special Operations Command Africa (COMSOCAFRICA) has created a JSOAC. It is collocated with SOCAFRICA in Stuttgart, Germany.

A key point in special operations C2 doctrine, especially as it relates to the planning, resourcing, and execution of ISR support, is that whether operating autonomously or in conjunction with other forces, special operations ISR must be synchronized and closely coordinated with other air operations in the theater. For JSOAC-Africa, the challenges of meeting those requirements are herculean, in terms of geography, scope of taskings, and complexity of the environment. This article will explore those challenges in order to show how one JSOAC is overcoming tremendous odds to ensure effective and timely ISR to achieve COMSOCAFRICA's strategic objectives.

The Challenge of Geography

Few people comprehend just how large Africa is as a continent. From Tunis, Tunisia, in the north, to Cape Town, South Africa, in the south, is about 5,000 miles, or a 16-hour flight in a C-130. From Dakar, Senegal, in the west, to the eastern tip of Somalia is 4,600 miles, about the same distance as from MacDill AFB, FL, to Hickam AFB, HI. One

interesting graphic shows all of the United States, Europe, China, and India superimposed on Africa … with room to spare. Africa is huge.

Africa is also home to 54 countries and more than one billion people. Despite being home to this many people, there are vast uninhabited or barely populated regions such as in the Sahara Desert which stretches across the African mid-section and is the size of China. The continent's large size also leads to incredible ethnic and language diversity—more than 3,000 ethnic groups and about 2,000 distinct languages. Unlike North America and Europe, though, there is no unifying alliance able to aid long-term relationships. Therefore, the challenge of geography is complicated by 54 nations exercising their rights of sovereignty as to how they manage airspace and operations over their territories. Africa is not Afghanistan nor Iraq, and our 15+ years of experience in those theaters have not prepared us for operations in what is still classified as a civilian, peacetime environment.

The sheer size of the African continent means there is a lot going on there. More and more, the US, Europe, China, and Russia are looking for opportunities for trade, investment, and long-term relationships. But businesses first need a secure and stable environment. So, in December 2018, US national security advisor John Bolton announced the new US strategy for Africa would focus on suppressing conflict and terrorism to create a stable environment for business investment. Europe also announced a renewed commitment to African security and development. Complicating the opportunities for trade and investment are chronic refugee crises, persistent civil wars, and pervasive threats from violent extremist groups exploiting fragile governments, ungoverned spaces, and crushing poverty.

It is no secret that Africa is home to some of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups: Boko Haram operates in central Africa, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb is in much of western Africa, the Islamic State has moved to North Africa, and Al Shabab keeps eastern Africa in turmoil. But the challenges of Africa go well beyond countering terrorism. African nations are dealing with threats from piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and also along the Horn of Africa, the challenges of refugee and migration problems in the Mediterranean Sea, and human and drug trafficking through West Africa into Europe. The US and many of our European partners have committed to helping African nations overcome these security challenges and SOCAFRICA is doing its part to help.

The Challenges of Scope

JSOAC-Africa is SOCAFRICA's air component. As one of our primary responsibilities we manage the planning, tasking, and execution of *joint* ISR support to special operations forces in Africa. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the different special operations on-going across the continent. It's safe to say there are many and they are diverse, spanning the full range of special operations core activities, and being conducted by all four of US Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) components. As you can imagine, many of our NATO allies' SOF are also engaged in Africa as part of operations we are involved with and also supporting the European Union, the United Nations, and other coalitions.

The ISR challenge for JSOAC-Africa is how to optimize the limited amount of available ISR resources because no matter how much there is, it is not enough to satisfy all the requests from all the special operations teams spread across the continent. US SOF have a significant amount of organic ISR resources available from both its Air Force and the Army components. That is not true for our traditional friends and allies, even those in NATO and Europe. And, because USSOCOM is a combatant command with global responsibilities, the manned and remotely piloted aircraft in AFSOC and the MQ-1Cs from the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment are naturally distributed to best support SOF teams wherever they are in the world. With all the problems in Africa it would be nice to think that JSOAC-Africa has the highest priority for SOF ISR support. Sometimes we do, but most of the time we do not. Therefore, SOCAFRICA uses a logical process for apportioning and allocating ISR to the different special operations task forces and other validated users. JSOAC-Africa uses SOCAFRICA's allocation decision to make assignments to the SOF ISR providers and distribute ISR the among the requesting units and task forces.

For SOF in Africa, the different "customers" will develop their ISR requests and submit prioritized lists to the SOCAFRICA J2. JSOAC-Africa's ISR team often facilitates their requests by reviewing, clarifying, and assisting the teams to determine what sort of ISR they really need. They might also suggest alternative ISR solutions the teams may not have considered. SOCAFRICA J2 collects all requests for ISR support from the users and then evaluates them according to COMSOCAFRICA's priorities.

At the theater level, the ISR management process is much, much bigger and thus more complicated and difficult than most are used to at the unit levels. COMSOCAFRICA has developed a collection strategy that is aligned with

US national and USAFRICOM (theater) objectives. That strategy is used by the SOCAFRICA to develop a prioritized collection listing that then allocates SOF ISR assets to fulfill as many user requests as possible. As mentioned earlier, there is never enough SOF ISR to meet all needs. In that case, we have to look outside SOF for help.

Happily, we are not the only ISR providers in Africa. US Air Forces Africa (AFAFRICA) provides conventional ISR support on the continent through its 603rd Air and Space Operations Center (AOC), located at Ramstein AB, Germany, but it too, is constrained in the amount of ISR available because of limited conventional resources allocated to the theater. The ISR Division at 603rd AOC follows a similar process for collecting, evaluating, and prioritizing ISR requirements from each of USAFRICOM's Service components. SOCAFRICA participates in 603rd AOC's joint collection working group (JCWG), either through the Special Operations Liaison Element (SOLE) or directly via secure VTC, advocating for ISR requirements from the teams that could not be met by organic SOF ISR resources. To be honest, "advocating for" is the nice doctrinal term. In truth, it's closer to a knife fight because everyone in theater needs and wants ISR support, so every component is doing their best to convince the AOC ISR Director that their needs are more important than anyone else's.

We've had some luck getting ISR support from AFAFRICA, mostly because the missions our teams are doing often have a relatively high priority at USAFRICOM. From a practical perspective, though, what helps our J2 "fight" for the teams is that when they give us their requests they ensure their requirements are linked to USAFRICOM and SOCAFRICA priorities and also give us enough information to "advocate" on their behalf. We've had some great ISR managers at JSOAC-Africa who have no problems getting with the users to clarify and strengthen the requests before sending them to SOCAFRICA J2 and then to the JCWG. Despite a shortage of SOF ISR resources, the combination of high priority missions and savvy ISR management has made it possible for us to meet the majority of ISR requirements from the teams on the ground. And for the teams that submitted the ISR requests, where they get the products they need to ensure mission success is often irrelevant. For them, the source of the ISR support is transparent. So long as their requirements are fulfilled within the timelines driven by the tactical situation, they are happy.

That reveals two other areas where JSOAC-Africa's ISR team "makes money." The first is when JSOAC-Africa's ISR specialists help the requesters determine what they really need. We work with some of the smartest and most talented "customers" in the DoD. The Special Forces, SEALs, Marine Raiders, and Air Commandos on the ground and working with their local counterparts are ISR-savvy. An informed customer is good, but it sometimes means they offer too much help. We don't go so far as to repeat the cliché, "Don't request a platform, request an effect and we'll manage the platforms to get you what you need," but there is a bit of that at play. Our planners work with them to help determine what ISR products are must-have (Go - No go), which are nice-to-have based on their mission analysis, and if there might be other technical solutions that ISR professional know about that operators may not. Often, this becomes helping them determine an acceptable balance of video, other imagery, communication intelligence (signals between people and organizations), electronic intelligence (electronic signals not used for communication), and other products, plus the required and desired timing for each. By working hand-in-glove with the users we facilitate getting them what they need, when they need it, and usually handling any contingencies during execution on their behalf. which is the second part of what ISR team does for the users.

It is rare that a mission or an operation goes exactly as planned. Once in execution, the tactical situation can and often does change. People are unpredictable and our adversaries often don't do what we want or expect. Weather can change. Aircraft break. Systems fail. Unwitting bystanders wander into the tactical area. The possibilities go on. Because the JSOAC's ISR team facilitates the teams' ISR planning and requests, when things do go awry we are then able to find acceptable alternative solutions to meet the users' needs and not risk their missions.

The Challenges of a Complex Environment

The third challenge we face is our environment. As was mentioned earlier,

Africa is 54 sovereign nations. The Africa Center for Security Studies observed in 2018 that conflicts in Africa don't follow Western notions of competition for status and power. Sometimes the situation is an incoherent mix of state security forces, paramilitaries, criminal organizations, local warlords, or commercial opportunists. Despite all the security issues those nations are dealing with, and you can read about the worst instances in the news—illegal or unethical environmental practices, transnational crime, human trafficking, ethnic conflicts, international terrorism, and refugees—

Africa is not at war. The airspace is civilian airspace and special operations aircraft follow civilian, peacetime rules when flying in, over, or through the air above those sovereign nations, even if we are there to help or simply transiting through one nation's airspace to get to an operating area in a different country. Most of Africa is uncontrolled airspace that is it is not controlled by radar, so pilots have to see and avoid other aircraft. Pilots joke about "big sky, little airplanes," but the danger to JSOAC-Africa's ISR assets is real. And the threat of a collision is increasing as businesses explore and develop ways to use commercial drones to deliver supplies, food, medicine, and blood to Africa's remotest areas, while at the same times governments use them for legitimate and needed surveillance work—law enforcement, anti-poaching, humanitarian operations, and disaster relief. It's not the "wild west" of airspace integration, but it's close.

Our job as the theater JSOAC, then, is to ensure we have our assigned ISR resources advantageously located to address the most likely ISR requirements per COMSOCAFRICA's guidance. Over the years we have been able to work with USAFRICOM and the country teams in the US embassies to base some of our ISR assets on the continent. That is an exercise in diplomacy. While there may be valid operational reasons for basing in a certain location, and the host nation's government might fully agree with the request, it is not always possible to get the basing and permissions we want or that make tactical sense because the host government may have domestic or regional concerns that outweigh tactical expedience. For example, and this is not specific to Africa, should a host nation have concerns about the number of Americans in their country, they may choose to limit the size of the deployment which in turn limits the number of maintainers, crewmembers, and other supporting staff. Artificial limits on the number of people allowed into the country might cause us to seek another, less advantageous, basing location. Having the ability to place pilots, sensor operators, and analysts for RPAs geographically distributed from their aircraft helps us manage that aspect.

Another factor adding to the complexity of the environment is the number of external actors trying to do good things with and for the people of Africa. For example, the European Union (EU) has a strong military and civilian presence in a number of African nations through its EU training missions (EUTMs), EU capacity building (EUCAP) efforts, and EU military operations (EUFOR). For our European partners, any SOF they offer to EU missions will be the same ones that would be used to also support other NATO commitments. Currently there are EUTMs ongoing in Somalia, Mali, and the Central African Republic providing advice and assistance to those nations. EU naval forces, including maritime SOF, are engaged on and around the continent. Operation SOPHIA is an EU counter-terrorism, maritime surveillance, and capacity-building effort in the Mediterranean Sea, off of North Africa, and Operation ATALANTA is an EU counter-piracy operation in the western Indian Ocean.

The NATO Alliance is contributing to the African Union (AU) mission in Somalia (AMISOM) with funding, partner capacity building, training, and mobility support for AU peacekeepers helping to stabilize that emerging democracy. NATO naval forces are also conducting maritime countering terrorism efforts in the Mediterranean with Operation SEA GUARDIAN. The French continue to lead a coalition helping five of their former African colonies: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, known as the G5 Sahel Joint Force to counter terrorism, combat human and drug trafficking, and restore state authorities south of the western Sahara Desert . In other troubled areas on the continent, for example in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, and the Central African Republic, the United Nations has peacekeeping forces operating. And, with piracy levels rising in the Gulf of Guinea, major maritime nations are partnering with affected African nations in bilateral agreements to improve the security and safety of their commercial shipping fleets. This brief overview of the extremely complex security situation on and around the continent is not comprehensive, but it does begin to illustrate the complexity JSOAC-Africa is dealing with … for now, because things are constantly changing.

An Illustrative Example

The variety of international efforts to help Mali offers an outstanding case study as an example of the challenges of

synchronizing and deconflicting ISR requirements in Africa. At the time of this issue going to print, there is an EUTM headquartered in Bamako, the capital, that is advising and training Malian forces from Bamako to the Niger River in the south; an EUCAP civilian infrastructure project based in Bamako; a United Nations Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) in Mali's northern half; and the French-led Operation BARKHANE based in Chad, but operating with the G5 Sahel Joint Force across West Africa.

The UN's MINUSMA is the largest effort with over 15,000 peacekeepers from more than 50 countries working to provide security, push out Islamist terrorist groups, and alleviate

humanitarian suffering. Operation BARKHANE based out of N'Djamena, Chad, has about 1,000 soldiers conducting international counterterrorism work from Gao in northern Mali. Compared to what the UN and France are contributing, the EU missions are tiny. EUTM Mali has almost 600 military trainers working with the Armed Forces of Mali (FAM, in French) to restore their ability to defend their nation, while EUCAP Mali has about 150 law enforcement and judicial trainers helping the Malian national police and national guard forces provide security at the local level.

Our European partners supporting these operations with their conventional and special operations forces will sometimes ask us for ISR help because they know what the US brings in terms of capabilities and numbers of platforms, and they have been working alongside us during operations for decades. According to French news sources, the French Air Force is flying RPAs from Niamey, Niger, to support Op BARKHANE in all five nations of that coalition. Other nations have deployed medium altitude long endurance unmanned aerial ISR systems such as the Heron I to support security and humanitarian operations in Mali. Still, there is not enough ISR to support all requests for support.

What makes the Mali example valuable is that it shows how multiple well-meaning efforts can have the potential to cause an inadvertent tragedy. Geographically, the missions' different operating areas are the same, or at least overlap. At the political level, the organizations agree to collaborate and coordinate their activities, but at the user level, that becomes difficult. ISR contributors are likely to receive support requests from multiple users. And similar to the earlier description of prioritization and allocation internal to JSOAC-Africa, the different ISR providers in Mali first look to internal resources and then go outside their organizations to seek support from others. JSOAC-Africa coordinates with the EU, MINUSMA, and Op BARKHANE to ensure we are synchronizing our collection efforts with the others', considering if we might have the resources to help the others, and reviewing any airspace and operational concerns the providers might have. But, there is no overall "air manager," even for operations just in Mali, so the contributors have gotten together to create a somewhat informal command, control, and coordination mechanism for ISR. The good news is that it is working.

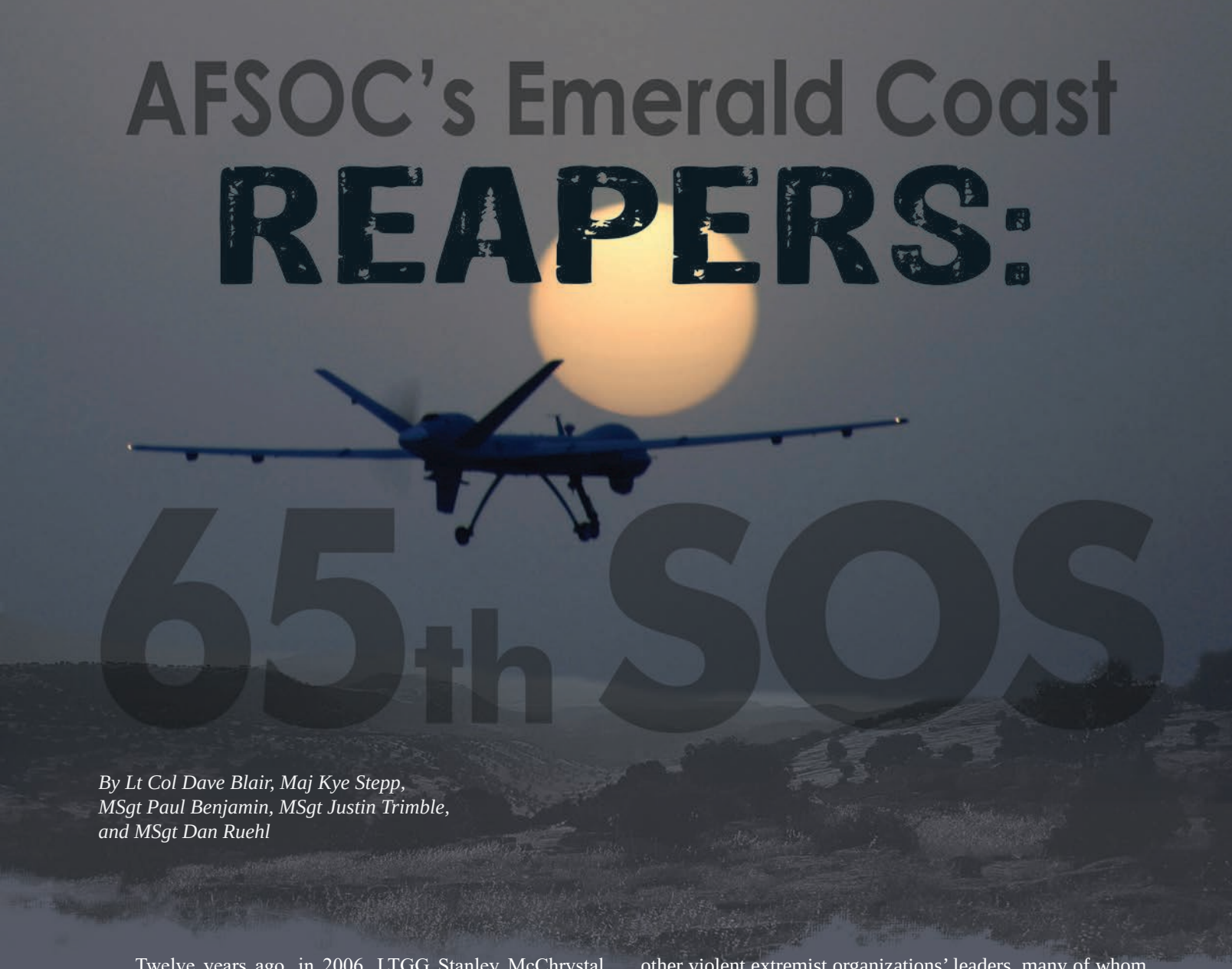
Conclusion

There are not a lot of times when command and control discussions become more interesting than the mission stories Air Commandos tell. The challenges of ISR C2 in JSOAC-Africa, though, might come close. Few people comprehend just how huge Africa is. We can blame that on the 16th century map-makers who developed the Mercator projection—remember, Greenland is not the same size as Africa, even though that is how it appears on the map. The scope of special operations in Africa includes many of USSOCOM's core activities: countering terrorism, counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and foreign humanitarian assistance. ISR is a critical aspect of all of these activities and it is our job at JSOAC-Africa to ensure the SOF teams we are tasked to support are getting the ISR they need, when they need it, and in a form they can use.

The final aspect that keeps life interesting for those who serve in this JSOAC is the sheer complexity of what we are dealing with. The security challenges are daunting, as well as overlapping. Support to a countering terrorism effort in one area may intersect with the EU or a sovereign nation's counter smuggling and trafficking activities. UN, EU, or other coalition operations may end up in a tactical situation that exceeds their capabilities and their leadership asks our leadership for help. The JSOAC-Africa ISR team must then go through the planning drill to see if and how we might help, and the impact on organic missions if we do. All these operational-level challenges: geography, scope of the missions, and complexity of the environment are unlike any other theater. The good news is that the team of ISR Air Commandos at JSOAC-Africa is overcoming the challenges and succeeding despite the reality of the situation.

About the Author: Col Lance Schmidt is the commander, Joint Special Operations Air Component-Africa. He is a command pilot with 3,900 hours in the C-21, MC-130H, and MC-130J. He previously commanded the 550th SOS and the 752nd SOG. He has served in a variety of flying and staff positions at the Numbered Air Force, combatant command, and Headquarters Air Force levels.

AFSOC's Emerald Coast REAPERS: 65th SOS



By Lt Col Dave Blair, Maj Kye Stepp, MSgt Paul Benjamin, MSgt Justin Trimble, and MSgt Dan Ruehl

Twelve years ago, in 2006, LTGG Stanley McChrystal tasked a handful of AFSOC crews to find and kill the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, using the MQ-1B Predator. The story of that months long operation was documented by CNN's Jamie McIntyre and released by the DoD to showcase the integration of intelligence and new technologies to support special operations. One little known fact is that AFSOC's SOF remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) force first stood up under the aegis of the 1st SOW. AFSOC Predator crews from "Pepe" Lehew's 16th Operations Group, Detachment One, hunted down the terrorist, al-Zarqawi, and then vectored a pair of F-16s to drop two smart bombs on his position. Those same crews became the 3rd Special Operations Squadron (SOS) under the leadership of Gary "Chainsaw" McCollum and Paul "Caltag" Caltagirone. As you can read in this issue of the *Air Commando Journal*, the men and women of the 3rd SOS went on to tighten the kill-chain around the rest of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In that crucible, the SOF RPA community was born.

Ten years later, in 2016, the next generation of SOF RPA crews reprised the feat of their forebears by flying heavily-modified MQ-9 Reapers to find, fix, and finish senior ISIS and other violent extremist organizations' leaders, many of whom had been inspired or trained by al-Zarqawi. Across nearly a dozen theaters of conflict, AFSOC crews from the 2nd SOS, 3rd SOS, 33rd SOS and the 12th SOS, along with their US Army SOF RPA brothers-in-arms at the 160th Special Operations Regiment, are protecting friendly ground forces and removing enemies from the battlefield. From bold beginnings, SOF's RPA community has matured into a decisive capability.

AFSOC's RPA community was forged in combat, but a decade of permanent deployed-in-garrison warfighting has started to take a toll on retention. AFSOC RPA crews only had one basing option, Cannon AFB, NM. That situation limited career development by confining the entire community to one location. Moreover, the new *National Defense Strategy* placed a premium on force readiness, with the Secretary of Defense charging us to out-think, out-maneuver, and out-innovate revisionist powers across the spectrum of conflict. Recognizing the need to reinforce the foundations of the AFSOC RPA community, Lt Gen Webb boldly directed the stand-up of a Hurlburt Field-based MQ-9 squadron. Fourteen months and thousands of staff hours later, the 65th SOS, the Lucky Dicers, was reborn.

History of the Lucky Dicers

In the 65th SOS, AFSOC inherited the proud legacy of the 65th Bombardment Squadron (BS) – a unit distinguished by the most decorated single sortie in American military aviation history. The 65th BS earned its historic legacy on a reconnaissance mission during the Pacific campaign of the Second World War. The legendary flight of Jay Zeamer's "Eager Beavers" is commemorated in the National Museum of the Air Force. Zeamer, serving as the operations officer for the Lucky Dicers, cobbled together a crew from across the unit, and they took to resurrecting a condemned B-17E, tail number 41-2666, nicknamed "Old 666." Not only did the rag-tag crew manage to restore the aircraft, they made a number of improvements, adding five additional machine-guns, including one .50 caliber fixed in the nose and fired by the pilot via a lanyard. The once-ragtag Eager Beavers made a name for themselves by volunteering for any and all missions, and became one of the most requested crews in theater because of their critical thinking, daring, and drive to solve problems.

Lt. Col. Jay Zeamer and his crew, the Eager Beavers, were a B-17 bomber crew stationed in Australia and New Guinea in 1942-43.

The most famous mission of the Eager Beavers began as a simple reconnaissance sortie. Zeamer had been given a request to survey the airfield at Buka, near Bougainville, swarming with Japanese Zero fighter planes. Zeamer had initially rejected the target due to the high threat to his single unescorted B-17. However, the crew arrived at their primary target, a photo-mapping mission of the reefs at Bougainville, about an hour early, before the sun was high enough to take the needed pictures. Zeamer and the crew decided to divert to the Buka airfield target while waiting for the sun to rise. While flying straight and level over Buka for the photo run, the Eager Beavers were jumped by at least five enemy fighters. The interceptors focused their fire on the normally weakly protected nose of the B-17. Using outstanding airmanship, Zeamer downed one fighter using his fixed forward firing gun, and the bombardier, Joe Sarnoski, claimed at least one more with his up-gunned nose gun.

After completing the photo run, Zeamer aggressively maneuvered the bomber using creative and practical tactics which opened up fields of fire for his gunners while denying enemy fighters geometry against critical areas of the bomber. At one point, the bomber was engaged by 17 enemy fighters, including one equipped with a specialized bomber-killing heavy cannon.

Despite being severely wounded, Sarnoski refused medical attention and continued to defend the aircraft. He later died at his post, claiming at least one more fighter and buying the crew vital time to complete the photo-run. After 45 minutes of fierce combat, the Eager Beavers downed five enemy fighters, and the enemy fighters were forced to disengage due to low fuel. Recognizing that the film they had taken would be absolutely critical to the planned invasion of Bougainville, Zeamer and the crew fought to keep their badly damaged airplane flying. The copilot and top turret gunner tended to the wounded and worked to keep the aircraft on course to an alternate airfield as severely wounded Zeamer drifted in and out of consciousness. Arriving over the alternate airfield, the pilot marshalled his remaining strength to land the wounded craft. Five months later, in November 1943, much of the credit for the successful landings at Bougainville was given to Zeamer and his crew who had mapped the paths the landing craft took through the coral reefs protecting the beaches.

Zeamer and Sarnoski (posthumously) received the Medal of Honor, and the rest of the crew received Distinguished Service Crosses, marking the Eager Beavers the most decorated aircrew in American history.

The audacious, yet prudent, risk-taking of Zeamer's crew echoes the creative thinking and airmanship displayed by Carpetbagger B-24 crews in Europe and the Air Commandos of the 1st Air Commando Group in Burma. In the same vein, 65th Bombardment Squadron crews pioneered the tactic of 'skip bombing,' which allowed heavy bombers to sink ships by tossing a heavy bomb from low altitude and skip it like a stone across a pond into the side of a ship. This spirit of innovation continued into the Cold War as the squadron transitioned to the B-58 Hustler supersonic bomber, where the 65th BS earned the final Bendix Trophy, a transcontinental racing trophy, and the Mackay Trophy in, both in 1962, for a transcontinental flight of 2 hours and 57 seconds, at a speed of 1,214 knots. The 65th BS then provided B-52 and KC-135 support to nuclear deterrence prior to casing the colors.

> **"Jay Zeamer and his crew performed a mission that still stands out in my mind as an epic of courage unequaled in the annals of air warfare."**
>
> – Gen George Kenney
> 5th Air Force Commander

AFSOC's Lucky Dicers

On 18 Dec 2018, the colors of the 65th were uncased once again, this time at Hurlburt Field. The 27th SOG Detachment 1, which had been flying combat RPA lines from Hurlburt Field for more than a year ceased to be. The RPA combat veterans of Det 1 which comprised of 3rd SOS, 33rd SOS, various ACC units, and some of the newest pilots and sensor operators out of the training pipeline became the 65th SOS. True to the finest

An MQ-9 Reaper at Cannon Air Force Base, NM. (Photo courtesy MSgt Dennis J. Henry Jr.)

traditions of the MQ-9 community, many of the crews at the ceremony had either just departed from flying the combat lines or headed out to fly those lines right after the ceremony.

Since that day, the Lucky Dicers have been extremely busy downrange. For obvious reasons we can't discuss what the squadron has been up to, but suffice to say that our missions have been in the news more than once. Less dramatically, but just as importantly, the squadron has been working to integrate the Reaper's remote persistent attack capabilities team into the 1st SOW.

In keeping with the SOF Truth that "Humans are more important than hardware," as the Dicers build out the squadron, we are doing so alongside our partners at Hurlburt. Our most important partnership is with our AF Reserve Command sister squadron, the Scorpions of the 2nd SOS. We fly together from their facility and we have conducted some of our most significant strikes together. The Scorpions and the Dicers enjoy a great Total Force partnership that will only deepen in time.

As we look toward the future, the MQ-9 community is at a crossroads in light of the recent *National Defense Strategy*. We cannot afford to be a niche weapon system useful in only a few scenarios, but the weapon system offers great potential at the low-end of global great power competition. In order to increase the strategic return of this community, we are building readiness by ending the 'culture of crisis' that characterized so many of the early years of AFSOC RPAs. We are building combat-focused processes with low overhead and spending the resulting returns on preparing for multiple potential future scenarios.

Just as MH-53 Pave Lows found creative ways to pick the lock of the Iraqi air defense systems prior to Operation DESERT STORM by leading a formation of Apache gunships, just as the slow, but-devasting AC-130 gunships obliterated Iraqi armored formations, and just as Air Commandos in Southeast Asia disrupted North Vietnamese supply routes in Laos during Operation COMMANDO HUNT, specialized AFSOC aircraft flown by crews having a SOF mindset can achieve great effects if used in ways unexpected by our adversaries. The AFSOC RPA team will do the same with the MQ-9.

Our community has turned miracles into proofs of concept before – as all Air Commandos do. We believe that the MQ-9 can impose costs and put our enemies on the horns of multiple dilemmas. By investing in aircrew training, by building Air Commandos who can design creative, non-linear solutions to wicked problems, and by partnering with the staff and our comrades in ACC, we can surprise our competitors with what this airplane can do when flown with a lot of guile. We are beginning this journey by investing in our people, examining how we can improve nutrition for crews working shifts – if their body is well fueled, their mind will be sharp for the fight. More innovations will follow, and the partnership between the intelligence analysts of the 11th Special Operations Intelligence Squadron and the 65th SOS is especially promising on that front.

AFSOC's Lucky Dicers are proud to introduce MQ-9 Reaper into the 1st SOW, the wing where SOF RPA operations began with the MQ-1 Predator. We are carrying the fight today, in multiple battlefields around the world. We are developing ways to improve retention within the MQ-9 community by improving talent management and career predictability between Hurlburt and Cannon. We will soon begin preparing for many more scenarios, exploring the wide-open field of irregular warfare and new partnerships across USSOCOM, while keeping faith and delivering excellent effects to our long-standing partners.

It is always an exciting time to be an Air Commando, and it is especially an exciting time to be an AFSOC MQ-9 flyer, as we develop innovative ways to provide SOF persistent attack … Any time, any place, anywhere.

Pilatus U-28A

The U-28 is the military version of the Pilatus PC-12 passenger and cargo aircraft. The PC-12 is the best-selling pressurized single-engine light cargo aircraft in the world with over 1,500 deliveries since flight certification in 1994. It is one of the few light turbine-powered cargo aircraft certified for rough field landing, making it ideal for austere and isolated environments.

In 2006, AFSOC fielded the U-28A by purchasing commercially available aircraft and modifying them with tactical communications capable of interfacing with DoD and NATO data-links, delivering full-motion video, and transmitting secure voice communications. The aircraft were also fitted with aircraft survivability systems, electro-optical sensors, and advanced navigation systems in order to provide manned fixed-wing tactical airborne ISR to support humanitarian operations, search and rescue, and conventional and special operations missions.

U-28 #07-0488, on short final for landing.

An upgraded PC-12NG (next generation) with more powerful engines, winglets, and upgraded avionics began deliveries in 2008. The PC-12M (multipurpose) is an adaptation of the PC-12NG with increased electrical capability to power on-board mission systems for air ambulance, intelligence collection, and law enforcement users and a cargo door in addition to the standard passenger door. An optional utility door embedded in the cargo door is available for the PC-12M that allows parachute operations for personnel and small cargo bundles.

AFSOC operates a fleet of approximately 28 aircraft, all in the Active duty force.

FACTS IN BRIEF:

- Designed and built by Pilatus Aircraft, Ltd.
- Crew: Two pilots, one combat systems officer, one tactical systems officer
- Wingspan: 53 feet 3 inches (16.23 meters)
- Length: 47 feet 3 inches (14.4 meters)
- Height: 14 feet (4.25 meters)
- Speed: 220 knots
- Range: 1,500 nautical miles
- Ceiling: 30,000 feet
- Powerplant: 1 × Pratt & Whitney PT6A-67B turboprop

OTHER MILITARY USERS:

Afghanistan: 18 PC-12NG for special missions
Bulgaria: One PC-12 for VIP transport
Finland: Six PC-12NG as liaison aircraft
Ireland: Three PC-12NG for ISR and transport
South Africa: One PC-12 for VIP transport
Switzerland: One PC-12 for VIP transport

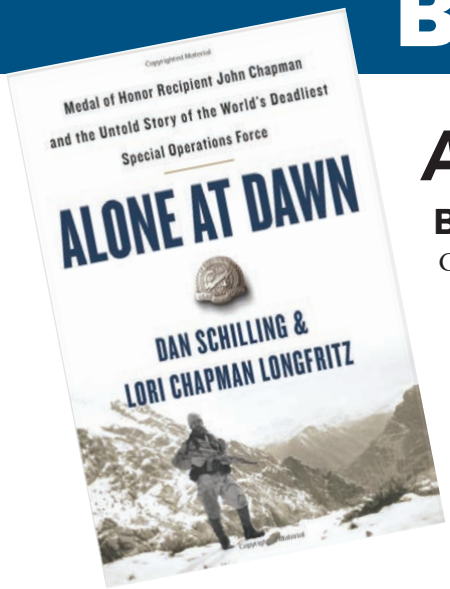
LAW ENFORCEMENT USERS:

Argentina
Australia
Canada
US Customs & Border Patrol

Sources: Pilatus Aircraft, Ltd., and Air Force Special Operations Command

Book Review

By Scott E. McIntoxh, Maj, USAF (Ret)



Alone at Dawn

By Dan Schilling & Lori Chapman Longfritz

Grand Central Publishing, 2019, 352 pages

There are a number of works available about the events surrounding Roberts Ridge and the early days of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. I read Sean Naylor's *Not a Good Day to Die* when it was published in 2005, Malcolm McPherson's *Roberts Ridge* while sitting in the passenger terminal awaiting transport to my Iraq tour in 2011, and Doug Stanton's *Horse Soldiers* sitting on the front stoop of my containerized housing unit at al Asad AB. *Alone at Dawn*'s bibliography reveals that its authors also read these books to research the events surrounding John Chapman's final days, and that those works served as building blocks to a final product that is both unique and innovative.

First, Schilling, a Combat Controller (CCT), relates what he can about the career field. Everyone can tell you about Navy SEALs from the accounts in books and movies that have emerged in the last 30 years, but the CCTs have remained quietly off the radar. Dan Schilling has woven his first-hand knowledge about CCTs together with accounts like Forrest Marion's recently-published *Brothers in Berets* and Christopher Robbins' work on Air America to ultimately reveal why Chapman was in the same Chinook helicopter with Neil Roberts' SEAL unit and how his presence would dramatically amp up that unit's effects in the battlespace. Chapman represented a battle-tested 3-dimensonal perspective plugged into a team of 2-dimensional operators. CCTs are high-value low-density assets enabled by advanced communications and air traffic control certification with "the ability to move freely among units, services, and allies, sometimes from week to week or even on a daily turn … [an ability] unique to CCT ..." The book also offers contemporary accounts intercepted from al Qaeda attesting to the fact that the airpower over Afghanistan was severely hindering their operations and killing off their human capital.

When the book opens in 1966 with an enlisted CCT pumping gas into a Pilatus Porter on a jungle airstrip in Laos, then launching to orbit and ultimately roll F-105s toward a ground firefight, it illustrates the fact that USAF has held this capability for at least half a century—professionals like Chapman who maximize air-to-ground munition deliveries with minimal fratricide are the most recent manifestation of this capability. *Alone At Dawn* transitions artfully from Southeast Asia to Windsor Locks, CT, where John Allan Chapman is beginning his childhood in 1966, where "no one in the Chapman home could possibly imagine the direct line that would lead from America's secret war in Laos to their son becoming one of the most elite warriors in history."

Here, the narrative could have gone lazy. Every account of the CCT and pararescue training pipeline elucidates the fact that people without character and persistence don't graduate. The authors go deeper, though, into Chapman's motivations and formative years. He was an accomplished high school athlete, but stood up for bullied classmates. He didn't finish college, but he put in the all-nighters to master the technical tasks of his career fields. Having earned the CCT's red beret, he ruptured his spleen riding a horse and missed DESERT STORM. Chapman's life was complicated and his life held some disappointments, but that's what makes this true story so compelling. His actions at Takur Ghar rightfully secured him the Congressional Medal of Honor. His family situation, however, had only recently inspired him to leave CCT for a more stable life, and the book argues that if 9/11 had not happened his leadership and courage likely would not have been on that mission at Roberts Ridge.

General McChrystal's recent book on leadership argues that the quality of leadership is contextual, dynamic, and "an emergent property in a complex system"—that to accurately assess leadership you must look at everything going on around a personality when it occurs. Schilling and Chapman Longfritz have not penned a simple biography here, but have attempted to convey the contributing factors, influences, and environment surrounding the isolated CCT on 4 Mar 2002. Part of the art in this narrative lies in the pervasive sense that all John Chapman's upbringing, training, experience, and character led to that focal final moment of his rich life, but there are other nuanced observations here that set the stage for it. Controlling air in the early days of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM was an awesome responsibility in very unforgiving terrain. Not only was fratricide a traditional concern, but operators could be manipulated by local allies into applying air-delivered ordnance to "a village-on-village Afghan-style Hatfields-versus-McCoys feud" that had nothing to do with U.S. interests.

When Schilling, who has also written a book on Mogadishu with his co-alumnus from *Blackhawk Down*, Matt Eversman, writes of the inadvisability of inserting soldiers by helicopter in Afghanistan due to factors of altitude, weather, and enemy knowledge of preferred US methods, there's gravitas to that. There is a feeling of stark discomfort in his description of humping 120-plus pounds of gear into 10,000-foot altitudes and freezing

temperatures, with lack of sleep clouding your view through night vision goggles. The teams are small and they don't carry a lot of ammunition. CCTs often give up most of their ammunition for spare batteries because they are their team's communication lifeline. Indeed, the account states that when Chapman exited the helicopter at Takur Ghar he carried only seven 30-round magazines for his M4 rifle.

Humping toward the objective, there is comfort in overwatch from unmanned aerial vehicles, but those platforms have limitations, to include inducing micromanagement from distant command posts receiving the real-time imagery. The enemy, however, was usually acclimated to altitude, dug in, and therefore familiar with the terrain. By contrast, "1:100,000 US maps had very little detail, Russian 1:50,000 topographical maps were never as accurate or reliable as their US counterparts (which didn't exist for the region anyway), and satellite imagery was inadequate for the man on the ground." As the book describes it, under the best conditions, CCTs in this environment were under some serious pressure to talk bombs onto the right coordinates. To make matters worse, "[i] n the early days of the war, the potential for fratricide was an ever-present danger to unconventional forces… Pilots simply weren't used to identifying American forces not in uniform, especially when they were riding in nonmilitary vehicles." The account delves into all these atmospherics, as well as Neil Roberts' final moments on the ridge, in the attempt to convey the situation John Chapman confronted on his last day and the constraints on the intense, violent


TSgt John Chapman

effort expended in rescuing these two brave men from their perilous situation.

While the book is comprehensive and compelling, it is certain to cause turmoil.

The SEAL leaders' actions, the book asserts, were essential to producing the complex system surrounding Chapman in his final hours on Takur Ghar. It is implicit in this narrative that the leadership wanted to get its SEALs into the fight as quickly as possible, enabling a command climate that would downgrade the risk of putting big twin-rotor helicopters into an objective likely to defend itself with rocket propelled grenades and 12.7 mm DShK heavy machine guns.

Fourteen CCTs officially played a supporting role in ANACONDA. Schilling and Chapman Longfritz, though, imply that in the big picture, the other operators were the de facto support to the continued transformation of combat control capability. To widen the aperture and bring the reader back to the book's opening pages, "For Combat Control, ANACONDA exemplified the maturation of a nearly forty-year evolution beginning in the jungles of Laos. Without direction or pre-planning, individual controllers, some of whom didn't even know one another, established a self-organizing and –directing network that destroyed the most organized and effective force Al Qaeda and the Taliban would ever muster on a field of battle." This operation, the book states, provided a crucible for "an Air Force no one knew or even suspected existed."

I would argue that the book itself is the logical extension of the investigations, accounts, and identified lessons collected since we lost MSgt Chapman on that mountaintop. The pertinent works on ANACONDA and Roberts Ridge I listed earlier in this review are all present in *Alone At Dawn*'s bibliography, alongside further investigative reports from Sean Naylor and Matthew Cole. There are also, however, the warmer and less clinical first-hand impressions of John Chapman as a colleague, husband, and father — and we need that when our airmen and our kids ask us what character looks like. I think the authors have done the heavy lifting in deriving those conceptual and dynamic factors that McChrystal considers essential in evaluating leadership, and have produced a work that surpasses both biography and after action review. I don't know if this will be the last book written on John Chapman and Roberts Ridge; however, I don't imagine it will be easy to improve upon.

About the Reviewer: Maj (retired) Scott E. McIntosh is a former Leadership and Command instructor at Air Command and Staff College, as well as the former director of the South-Central Asia Orientation Course at USAF Special Operations School. In 2002, he worked at Bagram's Expeditionary Air Support Operations Center supporting Task Forces Mountain, 82, and others. He currently teaches a course on Law Enforcement Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism at Newman University.

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