

# WARTHOG'S FINI-FLIGHT

## WOUNDED A-10 WAITS IN THE WINGS

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

Like a hornet with its wings pulled off, A-10A aircraft 81-987 sits flightless on the ground at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. It scowls at nothing in particular.

The aircraft's painted-on eyes won't see combat anytime soon. Its wings are stored upright alongside the fuselage. The Thunderbolt II "Warthog" is neither alive nor dead. It's in a state of limbo. Air Force officials haven't decided whether to fix the \$10 million aircraft or to leave it at the "boneyard" for scrap metal and parts.

If the Warthog were an Airman, this 21-year veteran probably would've been awarded three or four Purple Hearts and a Distinguished Flying Cross, then medically retired after an April 2003 incident during Operation Iraqi Freedom [See "A-10 Pilot Brings Crippled Aircraft Home," June 2003].

This specific A-10 enlisted April 14, 1983. The Air Force named it 81-987 — 81 was the year the jet was funded, and it was the 987th aircraft rolled off the assembly line that year.

It was created with no eyes or mouth. They would be painted on later. The Thunderbolt II was named after the P-47 Thunderbolt, used for close air support during the latter part of World War II. Its first assignment was to England, where it was stationed at Royal Air Force Bentwaters, and then to Royal Air Force Alconbury.

In December 1991, it was redesignated an OA-10A. In addition to providing close air support, its pilot could also be an airborne forward air controller. But the jet remained unchanged — same equipment, same airframe, same everything.

It was assigned to Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., in 1995, and then eventually ended up at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., where it became the primary aircraft for Capt. Kim Campbell, a pilot with the 75th Fighter Squadron.

On March 1, 2003, she and her A-10 arrived at a base near Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"When we heard the plan that we would be doing close air support in downtown Baghdad, we knew

### Tech. Sgt. Nick Pflughaupt (above)

uses a mirror to assess the damage to an A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthog" during a training exercise at Hill Air Force Base, Utah. His unit, the 649th Combat Logistics Support Squadron, sent an aircraft battle damage repair team to fix an A-10 (right) that was severely wounded over the skies of Baghdad during the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The A-10's existence lies in the balance at the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.



by Terry Vanden-Heuvel

by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

it was going to be tough," she later said in speeches throughout the United States.

### Damaged in action

She was right. Things got scary, especially on April 7 when she heard a large explosion at the back of the aircraft while flying over Baghdad. "There was no question in my mind. I knew immediately I was hit by enemy fire," she said.

Her plane was crippled. Red hydraulic fluid spurted out as if from a severed artery, as both fluid gauges read empty. She switched the jet to manual control. After many tense minutes that seemed to stretch into hours, she managed to land the injured jet into the arms of its caretakers at home base.

Captain Campbell marveled at the amount of damage the aircraft endured. Shrapnel had torn into the fuselage and sheared the left and right hy-

draulic lines in two locations. The back end of the jet looked like Bonnie and Clyde's Ford after the shootout that left both criminals dead. Although not confirmed, weapons experts believe a surface to air missile slammed into the right horizontal stabilizer. Shrapnel had ripped into the right engine. There were even signs that the back end of the jet had caught fire.

"My crew chief, Staff Sgt. Ian Morace, had told me to bring the jet back with nothing on it," Captain Campbell said. "He was referring to dropping and shooting all the ordnance. But I don't think what I brought back was quite what he had in mind."

Maintainers can do a lot of things, but this wounded Warthog needed emergency technical care. Fortunately, an aircraft battle damage repair team from Hill Air Force Base, Utah, was already at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, for just such a crisis.

### Aircraft medics make house calls

Since military aircraft came into existence, there has always been a need for aircraft battle damage repair teams. During World War I, mechanics had to improvise and sometimes use parts from discarded French farm machinery to keep aircraft aloft. This ingenuity showed itself time and again during later wars.

"During Vietnam, maintainers just wanted to get the aircraft in the air as quickly as possible," said Senior Master Sgt. Kevin Firestone, a member of Hill's 649th Combat Logistics Support Squadron. "So they used discarded Coke cans and rags. They'd cut off both ends of a can to repair hoses. They were hatchet jobs, but they got it done."

Today, Kevlar and graphite high-tech solutions are used for repairs. There are repair teams for each airframe in the inventory.

"It's like taping a football player's ankle so he can finish the game," said Tech. Sgt. Dave Sepulveda, an aircraft battle damage repair section chief and trainer at Hill. "Our repairs are done so aircraft can continue in a war."

Tech. Sgt. Michael Emmendorfen, an aircraft battle damage repair instructor at Hill, was on the team that responded to the ailing A-10.

"When I first saw the jet, I wondered how [the pilot] got it back because all hydraulics were gone," he said. "I really appreciate her flying skills."

Like surgeons with scalpels, the team dug deep

by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



into its metallic epidermis to determine if it was fixable. Each team member is a sort of jack-of-all-trades. For instance, a sheet metal worker may get exposed to electrical training. Crew chiefs dabble in sheet metal work.

"This way, if the sheet metal guy gets killed, our electrician can do some of the sheet metal work," Sergeant Sepulveda said. "We train for the casualties of war."

Their education even includes having explosive experts use C-4 explosives to blow holes in training jets, and then having team members cut sheet metal pieces to use as Band-Aids.

### Life in limbo

However, no amount of training was going to help fix 81-987. Although they tried to patch a few holes, the team determined there was too much structural damage, inside and out, to repair the jet at its deployed location. Besides, the team's war wagon, a road kit that has nearly every tool and material imaginable, didn't have the equipment required to restore the jet. It was deemed not fixable.

The team spent the next five days dismembering the A-10. They packed it up and shipped it to Davis-Monthan where it sits in the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center. It may not fly in combat anymore, but it's not forgotten.

"For the amount of damage the jet took, it flew extremely well," Captain Campbell said. "It's a true testament to the durability of the A-10. Although it may never fly again, I think it had one hell of a flight." ✪

### Caring for the casualties of war

Aircraft battle damage repair teams are configured differently for each aircraft in the Air Force inventory. The following 15 members compose a normal aircraft battle damage repair team for a damaged A-10 Thunderbolt II:

- \* Structures, 2A7X3 — five
- \* Crew chiefs, 2A3X3J — five
- \* Fuels, 2A6X4 — two
- \* Electricians, 2A6X6 — three

— Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

### Members of an aircraft battle damage repair team

fine-tune their skills on the rear fuselage of a decommissioned Warthog at Hill. To make the training realistic, explosive ordnance teams use C-4 explosives to blow holes in the aircraft to simulate antiaircraft artillery damage.

**Tech. Sgt. Michael Emmendorfen patches the holes of A-10 aircraft 81-987 days after it was riddled with antiaircraft fire over Baghdad. The Hill repair team couldn't save the jet, so it was dismantled and shipped to Davis-Monthan.**

