



Mike Lawrence



Mike Lawrence (left), plays "Godfather" as he passes updated scenario information to the electronic warfare threat operators by phone while Robert Lowe (seated) and Ken Gallagher discuss upcoming electronic warfare missions at the TAC-90 radar display.

# The Godfather

## Leading the attack, aiming to improve pilots

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

From the confines of his armchair, he has the capability to strike down anyone entering his domain of more than 67,000 square miles.

Defeated survivors, armed with the world's most sophisticated weaponry, make their way to the confines of his dimly lit office. When they come face to face, a look of surprise emerges, and they ask, "Are you the Godfather? Wow, I didn't know you could do that."

Mike Lawrence, a retired chief master sergeant, acknowledges his title and sits down with young pilots to show them where they may have gone wrong on the range.

That's the best thing about being a Godfather.

"It's that direct link between me and that pilot who's going to put his life on the line some day," he said of his role as a range control technician with the 353rd Combat Training Squadron at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska.

He's one of five range control technicians who share the 'Godfather' moniker that describes their role when pilots go to Eielson's Pacific Alaska Range Complex to sharpen their ground attack skills and electronic warfare and defensive countermeasure training.

The Godfather is in charge of manned and unmanned integrated air defense systems scattered about the training range the size of Washington state. Some of the sites are so remote that Airmen and technicians require helicopter airlift. But the sites aren't beyond the reach of the Godfather.

### All knowing

"The Godfather knows everything. He controls everything," Mr. Lawrence said with a smile.

There's a lot to know and control. During major exercises such as Cope Thunder, more than 80 friendly and adversarial aircraft buzz the skies training for combat.

From his work area that resembles a command post with its radar screens and charts, the Godfather views the battlefield from both the pilot's perspective via a pod mounted on his aircraft, and from video cameras mounted at 25 threat sites perched on hillsides. In addition to using electronic devices to simulate an enemy locking onto an aircraft, the 11 manned sites also can launch low-tech pyrotechnic devices resembling Roman candles to simulate a surface-to-air-missile launch or anti-aircraft artillery — triple-A.

Mr. Lawrence sees the F-16 Fighting Falcon approaching an enemy location on his radar screen long before either party is aware of each other's existence. He then calls the enemy operator at one of the manned sites by radio to prepare him to attack. The needs of the customer

determine how tough the godfather and his team dole it out, Mr. Lawrence said.

Their simulated attacks can range from an Iraqi conscript taking potshots with a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile to a seasoned enemy soldier directing precise radar-guided missiles or operating communications jamming equipment. The godfather can vary the awareness of his team through a simple message to be on the lookout for enemy aircraft in the area to providing its exact heading, altitude and range.

It can be extremely intense for about an hour while directing the battle, he said. The chatter of his "enemy" Airmen at the remote sites grows in intensity as they hail Mr. Lawrence with cries of "Godfather! Godfather!" on their radios to report an approaching aircraft.

#### 'We just killed them'

Their handiwork sometimes can be extremely lethal against unsuspecting pilots. That was the case when an Air National Guard unit flying B-1 Lancers arrived for a week of training.

"From day one, we just killed them," he said, but noted that's not their goal or intent. "My job is not to kill him. My job is to train him."

Records are kept of every shot taken against a pilot so by the end of the training period they have a clear snapshot of their performance.

"Sometimes crews aren't aware just how bad they did until they see it on tape during



the debrief each day," Mr. Lawrence said. But their focus sharpens quickly after only a few encounters with Godfather and crew.

"You can see improvement from one debrief to the next. By day five, they [the B-1 pilots] defeated the enemy and all survived. Their improvement level went through the roof. That's the most satisfying thing to me. To see them change their tactics and improve."

But most rewarding of all is when a young lieutenant or captain goes to him at the end of the day for feedback, said Mr. Lawrence, whose own Air Force career spanned 27 years in the aircraft maintenance career field. An aviation enthusiast, he's a licensed pilot and largely self-taught in areas such

**A "mock" Russian SA-3 surface-to-air missile** stands poised on a hillside to serve as a visual target that adds a sense of realism for pilots flying through the range. The missiles are constructed of steel pipes and welded fins that are mounted to a 2 1/2-ton army truck. Sergeant Neal (right) travels the range to ensure that these targets aren't obscured by deep snow.

as electronic warfare through intensive reading.

The job is fun, but demanding. So when another Cope Thunder kicks off and the skies are once again filled with aircraft waiting for a fight, he has to be ready.

"You get pumped up again. You give the best you can," he said. "It's important to me to see they're being challenged because that lets me know we're doing our job." ❄️

#### **Master Sgt. Steve Neal oversees acquisition and scheduled maintenance**

of all electronic warfare threat sites on Eielson's 60,000-square-mile range and military operating area. After an hour-long trek across ice packed dirt roads, Sergeant Neal checks in with threat site operator, Bob Garmann (background) who transmits surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery radar signals to aircraft entering the valley below. "Travel across the range is much slower in the summer months when frozen soil turns to deep mud and low valleys can become gushing waterways," Sergeant Neal said.

