

Pilot values liaison work with Army

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM — It takes more than a pilot in a plane to put bombs on target. Sometimes it takes a pilot on the ground.

Air Force pilots, acting as air liaison officers and assigned to Army units, paint a roadmap in the sky for pilots overhead so they can drop bombs on the enemy without harming nearby friendly forces.

Capt. **Danny Stout**, a liaison officer and B-52 Stratofortress pilot, is deployed to Afghanistan from Fort Drum, New York, with the 10th Mountain Division.

Stout, whose job is “to focus solely on our aircraft in the [sky],” is on a classified mission with the 2nd Battalion

by 2nd Lt. Rebecca Garland

ion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Using mirror flash or sometimes smoke, the captain “talks [pilot’s] eyes” onto the unit’s position so they know where the friendly forces are before engaging targets.

“It’s most important for them to find us first,” Stout said. “Then we direct them to the enemy by guiding them onto obvious locations on the ground like a tower or something.”

Supporting aircraft don’t always drop bombs because the unit on the ground isn’t always receiving fire, but the pilots are ready and fly in the area until replaced with another set of fighters.

“As long as they’re in the sky above us, I’m talking to them,” said Stout, whose time on the ground has given him a new perspective on the daily life of a ground soldier — a view he couldn’t appreciate from the cockpit.

“I’ve learned to adopt and respect the Army way,” he said. “They look at me as part of their team because I choose to be a team player. We camp out a couple

of weeks at a time, and these guys don’t pack anything extra, except socks.

“We stink when we’re done, and they make a career of this,” he said. “This is definitely my Air Force-appreciation tour.”

Not all pilots want to be liaison officers, a two-year tour that keeps fliers from the cockpit. But Stout believes it’s a worthwhile experience.

“The worst concept for any pilot is to not be able to fly for two years, but I think this experience has made my time out of the cockpit worth it,” he said. “I would never be in charge of 25 enlisted guys like I am now. I would also never camp out with the Army, [travel] with them or make these friends had I not been a liaison officer. Working with the tactical air control party has given me an all new appreciation for how our young enlisted guys call in close air support.”

Stout has controlled many different aircraft since arriving in Afghanistan, including A-10 Thunderbolt IIs, B-52s, F-16 Fighting Falcons, F-15E Strike Eagles and Marine AV-8 Harriers. Though the planes may change, the language is universal.

“We have a pretty standard way of communicating,” Stout said. “Being a pilot helps me know what they’re thinking up there and helps me say the right things.”

That knowledge is key when firepower is needed in a hurry. Since arriving in Afghanistan in April, Stout said he has developed a new appreciation for the term “sense of urgency.”

“When guys on the ground need close air support, they need it right then because they’re probably being fired at,” he said.

Stout has been a part of many major operations since his deployment, and though the war may be over, he said it’s important for people to remember that people are still at risk.

“People forget that there are still operations going on, and people are still getting killed here in Afghanistan,” he said. “We have troops in the field, and the enemy is out there. It’s important to remember that it’s still serious over here.”

— 2nd Lt. Rebecca Garland
484th Air Expeditionary
Wing Public Affairs



Capt. Danny Stout tests his radio equipment before a mission to the mountains of Afghanistan with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division. Stout, an air liaison officer and B-52 pilot, travels with the Army unit to call in close air support missions against enemy troops.