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AFCENT Combat Camera Team

7/2/2009 - CAMP BASTION, Afghanistan -- Air Force Combat Search and Rescue crews fly throughout Afghanistan, providing airlift and medical care to servicemembers wounded on the battlefield. More often than not, this requires them to fly into and operate in extremely hostile and precarious situations and locations.

Aerial gunners are charged with protecting their CSAR teammates and do their best to bring everyone on the helicopter back safely.

"The HH-60s need to be able to land virtually on top of the POI (point of injury) to quickly recover the wounded," said Tech. Sgt. Scott Matthews, 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron aerial gunner. "The helicopters are a huge target for the enemy and we need to have our heads on a swivel making sure the PJs (pararescuemen) have the cover they need to recover injured people."

The rescue crews are successful in recovering the wounded largely because of the speed in which they can get to a location and extract the wounded on the ground.

"Speed is everything, so you need to be very familiar with your job so that you don't cause any delays," said Staff Sgt. Tim Chase, 129th ERQS aerial gunner, deployed from the 41st Rescue Squadron at Moody AFB, Ga. "We constantly train for these missions. This allows us to work confidently and quickly when we are on a mission. All that training helps us keep our guys safe in a hostile environment."

The irony of the aerial gunner's role in a rescue flight is that it often requires them to take a life in order to save another.

"The aspect of this job I love more than anything else is that we're here saving lives," Sergeant Matthews said. "On the flip side, we need to make sure that when PJs step off the bird to get the wounded, they have the protection they need. This may require taking out the bad guys so the good guys succeed."

For the crews, flexibility is important, as they never encounter the same situation twice.

"The challenges that come with being in the back are constantly changing and dynamic because the CSAR (combat search and rescue) platform changes according to whatever theater we operate in," said Staff Sgt. Sean Pellaton, 129th ERQS aerial gunner, a native of Castro Valley, Calif.

A common observation among the crews of the rescue flights is the amount of chaos they fly into when recovering the wounded.

"When we're on a mission, we're seeing all this chaos and right in the middle of that, there's this odd organization that exists," said Sergeant Matthews, deployed from the 129th Rescue Squadron at Moffett Federal Airfield, Calif. "We're right in the middle of these crazy situations. While we're observing what's going on all around us as thoroughly as possible for threats - whether natural or enemy - we're also playing an active part using the radios and manning a weapon."

The team, through training and experience, are completely in synch with one another, allowing the mission to become a well-orchestrated symphony of events. Once the helicopter lands, the gunners relay the signal for the pararescuemen and combat rescue officers to disembark from the helicopter to recover the wounded, while simultaneously alerting the operations center that the aircraft is wheel's down.

The flight engineers and aerial gunners man their .50 cal machine guns providing a virtual 180 degrees of security on each side, monitor the blaring radios, update the crew on the activity out their doors and prepare the ground forces for the helicopters' departure.

"It's all going down in a matter of seconds," Sergeant Chase said. "In that time, I'm looking for bad guys, the PJs are triaging their patients, I'm giving a 30 second call for liftoff, the (flight engineer) is making sure the systems are working and the pilots are focusing on getting us out of there and back to base camp. I don't know how or why, but everything just comes together."

Indeed, it's not until afterward that the crew has a moment to reflect on all the possibilities that could have happened during the mission. And it's a process built into the mission itself. Each flight results in a thorough debriefing, where the entire scenario is re-stopped and evaluated. With so much happening all at once, there can be a lot missed from one seat in the helicopter to the next.

"Everything happens so rapidly that it's only after the mission is complete that you realize how well everything went despite the chaos," Sergeant Matthews said. "That's when you realize how easily things could have gone wrong if you weren't focused enough, had enough training, or confidence in your crew's teamwork."

## Photos

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Staff Sgt. Sean Pellaton Aerial Gunner, 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron provides security during a medevac mission, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, June 26, 2009. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Staff Sgt. Shawn Weismiller)

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At the end of the day, it's the goal of the rescue mission that leaves the biggest impression on the crew.

"Being a gunner - I'm part of something much bigger than myself," Sergeant Matthews said. "We go in and get guys who, if we weren't there, may not make it to the next day or even the next hour."

"One of the greatest things a person can do is risk his life for another's," Sergeant Pellaton said. "It's an awesome thing and something any of us is willing to do. It's not just a motto to us, it's the soul of the mission."

*Editor's note: These stories are part of a series detailing the different aspects of the combat search and rescue efforts in Afghanistan to aid U.S. and coalition servicemembers, Afghan National Security Forces and civilians.*

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