



AFCENT's largest security forces squadron defends Bagram

by Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski
AFCENT Combat Camera Team

8/23/2009 - **BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan** -- There are no American Soldiers guarding the gates of Bagram Airfield. None in the towers. None patrolling the perimeter. And not a single American Soldier searches the thousands of people and vehicles entering the base.

But there are plenty of Airmen.

Several hundred of them, in fact. The 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron is the largest of its kind in Southwest Asia. Along with help from coalition partners, the Air Force defenders protect the entire installation.

In fact, since the Air Force inherited defense of Bagram from the Army this past spring, the defenders have searched hundreds of thousands of people and found several incidences of people having bomb-making materials, drugs and other illegal items.

"Base defense is what we do," said the squadron commander, Lt. Col. James Lowe, who is on a one-year tour from Shaw Air Force Base, S.C. "Having a dedicated security force means having the absolute right people for the right job. Outside of a few specialized missions, every security forces Airman can fill any defender role."

Those roles include:

- entry control points
- tower and gate guards
- roving patrols
- quick reaction force

"We inherited a big job from the Soldiers," said Chief Master Sgt. David Makowski, the squadron superintendent, deployed from Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. "The difference is that our security forces Airmen perform this exact mission every day. So we took a lot of their processes and built on them."

Bagram's presence means jobs for thousands of people, including local Afghans who help with everything from construction to operating vendor booths. But for the local residents, as well as third-country nationals, who work on base, it means going through a thorough screening process each morning and again in the evening. Security forces Airmen oversee that operation.

"We want to show them that we're not the enemy, so we use a firm, but fair, process to get them through the checkpoints," said Tech. Sgt. Jerrod Klein, a defender deployed from MacDill AFB, Fla. "At the gates, we get people through the scans and searches as quickly as possible while still doing our jobs. But if someone starts cutting in line, we'll send them home. Otherwise how is it fair to the people who do stand in line?"

The process usually takes 45 minutes or more, but before they've entered the installation, people and vehicles have gone through multiple searches, including visual inspections, physical pat downs and x-ray scans. Sergeant Klein said the process is necessary and keeps everyone as safe from harm as possible. But there are other advantages as well.

"We're all part of a partnership here," Sergeant Klein said. "We see a lot of the same people every day and most of them are just trying to feed their families. It's important to maintain our professionalism because if the



BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan - Staff Sgt. Shawna Collier watches over a crowd from a guard tower Aug. 10, 2009. Her tower is near a gate where Egyptian medical professionals provide care for the local populace. Sergeant Collier is a Michigan native and deployed from Holloman AFB, N.M., to the 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski)

community is happy with us, they're less likely to want to attack us."

There are further community outreach efforts at gates near the Egyptian and Korean compounds on base. The coalition partners operate hospitals where people "as far away as Kabul" come for medical care. With help from Afghan security guards, Airmen ensure the populace gets through the gate safely and securely.

"My job on the tower (at the Egyptian compound gate) is to provide overwatch for the people who just want to get seen by a doctor," said Staff Sgt. Shawna Collier, deployed from Holloman AFB, N.M. "I have a bird's eye view of the area so if there are any suspicious persons or vehicles, I can warn the team on the ground or provide covering fire."

With an installation as large as Bagram, quick reaction forces respond to a variety of situations anywhere on base, whether it's an attack, injury, securing unexploded ordnance sites or any other emergency.

"The QRF teams provide an immediate response anywhere on base," said Senior Airman Randy Maxwell, deployed from Vogelweh Air Base, Germany. "We're trained to deter threats to base security or protect an area. We're also all (combat life saver) certified in case we need to treat someone who's hurt."

In addition to the base defenders, some security forces Airmen also perform specialized missions. Sharpshooters, dog handlers and fly-away security teams offer particular skill sets that give commanders more options in protecting the base.

Sharpshooter teams "provide precision shots with long-range accuracy," said Staff Sgt. Joseph Duffy, a security forces marksman deployed from Davis-Monthan. They're able to observe potential target areas for long periods of time. If there's a threat to the base, its people or other assets, they're able to discretely engage targets from longer distances.

The Airmen in the military working dog section partner with their canine companions to search people, buildings, vehicles, mail and luggage. In addition to patrols throughout the base, the K-9s also work at the front gates.

"The dogs find things we otherwise might not," said Staff. Sgt. Chris Reynolds, a dog handler deployed from Vandenberg AFB, Calif. "They definitely make a difference out here."

Fly-away security teams travel on C-130 Hercules and C-17 Globemaster III aircraft to protect the plane and crew during missions.

"If something happens to an airplane, it slows down every other mission, so it's important to have fly-away security to keep that from happening," said Airman 1st Class Megan Curtis, deployed from Holloman. "As soon as the plane stops, we're on the ground to provide 360 degree security while cargo or passengers unload. We have a good team and work really well together. I couldn't have asked for a better mission for my first deployment."

For Colonel Lowe, having the opportunity to command this squadron of defenders with Airmen from more than 40 different bases around the world is "the highest honor."