MAGAZINE OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Airman

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SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2010

NEVER SAY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

design by Nick Medrano

Airman

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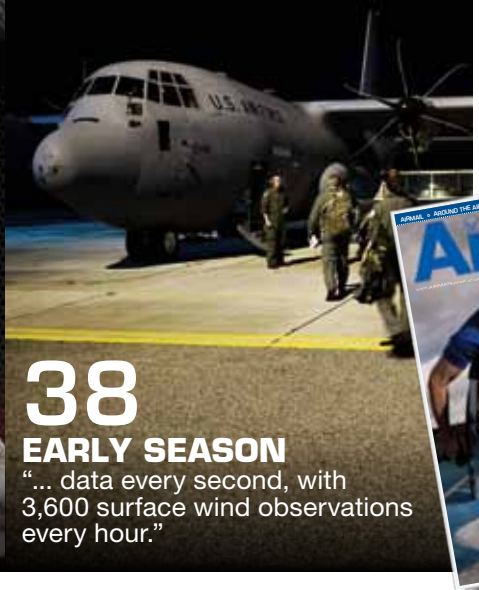

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photo support by Staff Sgt. Desiree Palacios
illustration and design by Luke Borland

COMMENTS

Got something to say about Airman? Write us at **airman@dma.mil,** or visit **www.AIRMANonline.af.mil,** to share views with fellow readers.

JULY-AUGUST

I just wanted to take a moment to thank you for the editor's note on the CV-22 article. ["Air Commandos" July-August 2010] That was a very tasteful note and I think all of us here at the 8th Special Operations Squadron appreciate you for keeping these guys from being forgotten.

Tech. Sgt. Chris Dawson
8th Special Operations Squadron
Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Great issue. Loved the pain ray article by Bennie [More Than Skin Deep" July-August 2010] … went to the Facebook page to watch the video – per his last paragraph – and can't find it!

Chief Master Sgt. Tyler Foster
Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Editor's reply: *Chief, the video is being posted again now that the issue is out. Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III is a good sport on his trips for Airman magazine and we hope you enjoy watching him squirm as much as we did.*

First, I would like to let you and the Airman magazine team know how pleased the F.E. Warren base population is with how the articles came out about our facility managers, chefs and crews. ["Man of the House," "Balancing Act" and Feeding the Mission" July-August 2010] Everyone appreciates how you captured three of the sometimes thankless jobs of this wing. The words and photos paint a great picture of the life members of the base lead. Due to high demand, I was hoping to receive an additional 100 copies, if possible.

Thanks again for all that you do and for putting this base in such a positive light.

Capt. Rodney Ellison
F.E. Warren AFB, Wyo.

Editor's reply: *Captain Ellison, your copies are on the way. Units may request additional copies by e-mailing us at Airman@dma.mil.*

MAY-JUNE

The special issue of Airman "Our Help Haiti" is exceptional from the cover to the final frame. It is one of the best military publications I've seen to date.

Michael Holzworth
Reprinted from the Airman magazine fan page on Facebook

SUBSCRIBING

Do you have to be officially in the Air Force, past boot camp and technical school, to qualify for free issues of Airman magazine? Because, I really like this magazine. I just enlisted and won't be going to basic training until January.

Thanks!

And please don't flame me for being cheap.

Remeet Singh

Editor's reply: *Airman magazine is always available for free online at www.airmanonline.af.mil. Hard copies are distributed through Air Force units and individual subscriptions are available for purchase through the Government Printing Office at http://bookstore.gpo.gov/actions/GetPublication.do?stocknumber=708-008-00000-1*

Airman NEXT ISSUE

THE NOVEMBER-DECEMBER ISSUE OF AIRMAN WILL TAKE A LOOK AT SOME OF THE UNIQUE MISSIONS PERFORMED BY THE AIR FORCE RESERVE AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD. HERE IS A PEEK AT TWO OF THOSE STORIES:

photo by Master Sgt. Jack Braden

Training Foreign Pilots

The Arizona National Guard's 162nd Fighter Wing specializes in training members of foreign air forces on the F-16, including pilots from the United Arab Emirates, who currently fly the F-16E/F Desert Falcon, the most advanced F-16. These Guardsmen dispel the part-timer stereotype. More than 80 percent of the wing is on full-time, active Guard and Reserve status.

photo by Master Sgt. Jack Braden

Operation Arctic Care

Thirty miles north of the Arctic Circle, an annual joint humanitarian mission known as Operation Arctic Care brings much needed medical care to communities. Airmen from Air Force Reserve Command led the operation. The command deployed more than 200 doctors, medics, veterinarians and other specialists, including a special mobile team that traveled on an Army Black Hawk helicopter to multiple villages.

Airman

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September-October 2010, Volume LIV, Number 6

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ABOUT AIRMAN

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photo by Master Sgt. Kevin J. Gruenwald

Two B-1B Lancers assigned to the 28th Bomb Squadron at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, release chaff and flares while maneuvering over New Mexico during a training mission. This year Dyess AFB celebrated the 25th anniversary of its first B-1B bomber.

First Lt. Dan Griffin, a pilot with the 358th Fighter Squadron from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., fires the 30 mm Gatling gun on the A-10 Thunderbolt II at the Barry M. Goldwater Range in Arizona. Lieutenant Griffin is a student in the A-10C Pilot Initial Qualification course and this was his first time firing the weapon.

photo by Airman Jerilyn Quintanilla

Staff Sgt. Trina Priddy defends her position on the camp perimeter during an operational readiness exercise at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. Sergeant Priddy is assigned to the 7th Security Forces Squadron at Dyess AFB.

photo by Airman 1st Class Brittney Smolinski

Staff Sgt. Richard Mabry searches for cracks on a B-1B wheel bolt at an air base in Southwest Asia. Sergeant Mabry is a non-destructive inspection craftsman with the 379th Expeditionary Maintenance Squadron.

photo by Senior Airman Kasey Zickmund

Airman 1st Class Limuel Beltran watches his wingman's back during a simulated robbery at Yokota Air Base, Japan. Airman Beltran is a member of the 374th Security Forces Squadron at Yokota AB.

photo by Osakabe Yasuo

A CV-22 Osprey lands at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. The Osprey demonstrated some of its capabilities to participants of the Joint Civilian Orientation Course, a Secretary of Defense-sponsored program. The course gives civilian community leaders an opportunity to learn about the military and national defense.

Airman 1st Class Daniel Coronado participates in an anti-terrorism exercise at the fitness center on Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. Airman Coronado is with the 39th Security Forces Squadron.

photo by Master Sgt. Russell E. Cooley IV

photo by Staff Sgt. Raymond Hoy

photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Marc Rockwell-Pate

An Airman jumps from the back of a Marine Corps CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter during a training mission off the coast of Djibouti in Africa. The Airman, who works as a pararescueman, is assigned to Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti.

Firefighters Staff Sgt. Jeffery Griffen and Staff Sgt. Chad Carrier try to access the "unconscious" pilot, Lt. Col. Eric Roman, during an exercise at Hill Air Force Base, Utah. The firefighters are with Air Force Reserve Command's 419th Civil Engineer Squadron, and exercise regularly. Colonel Roman is with the 419th Fighter Wing plans office.

Staff Sgt. Chris Browne, a 35th Maintenance Squadron aerospace propulsion test cell technician, monitors an F-16 Fighting Falcon engine running in the Hush House at Misawa Air Base, Japan. The Hush House does what the name implies: it allows mechanics to run a jet engine with less noise heard outside.

An F-16 Fighting Falcon takes off for a night mission from Joint Base Balad, Iraq. The aircraft is assigned to the 169th Fighter Wing at McEntire Joint National Guard Base, S.C. The 169th FW sent F-16s, pilots, maintenance specialists and support personnel overseas for its first major combat operation since 2003.

photo by Staff Sgt. Kyle Brasier

photo by Staff Sgt. Samuel Morse

photo by Tech. Sgt Caycee Cook

PUNISHABLE UNDER THE UNIFORM CODE OF MILITARY JUSTICE

In June, Air Force officials expanded regulations covering alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment. Lt. Col. Elizabeth L. Schuchs-Gopaul, a judge advocate with the Air Force Judge Advocate General Action Group, recently explained that the guidance specifically named the designer drug salvia divinorum, known as spice, inhalants, household chemicals, solvents and prescription drugs. Knowingly using or abusing these substances is punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Punishments can include dishonorable discharge, confinement for two years and the total forfeiture of all pay and allowances, the colonel said. Enlisted members could also face a reduction to the lowest enlisted grade.

EIGHTH TRI A CHARM

A Wilford Hall Medical Center orthopedic surgeon gave it eight "tris" before he won the Armed Forces Triathlon Championship.

Capt. James Bales' win also ended the Navy's streak of seven straight years at the top.

Even before earning the gold, Captain Bales had something to celebrate. He graduated from a five-year residency program at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

"Immediately following the graduation, I got on a plane to California and arrived at the race site around 9:30 p.m.," he said. "My wife laughed, she said, 'In 24 hours you graduated from residency and won the Armed Forces Triathlon Championship.'"

As the military's fastest triathlete, Captain Bales is planning a season of training and racing under the World Class Athlete Program, designed to prepare elite athletes for the Olympic stage.

His will spend much of the next two years training in Colorado Springs, Colo., and racing in Pan-American events to earn qualifying points for the U.S. Olympic Trials.

Until the training starts, the doctor must focus on his next challenge: passing the orthopedic board exams.

ENERGY AWARENESS MONTH | OCTOBER 2010

U.S. Air Force

A NEW CULTURE:

ENERGY as an Operations Enabler

- Reduce Demand
- Increase Supply
- Change the Culture

U.S. AIR FORCE

Returning Home

A LITTLE SCIENCE, A LITTLE SWEAT BRING HERO HOME

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON

In 1949, then 1st Lt. William Mason went on a blind date with a girl named Irene. He graduated from West Point just two years earlier and was among the first to join the new Air Force. There he focused on becoming the best pilot possible eventually earning the rank of colonel. Four months after that blind date, he and the girl wed and spent the next 19 years together before being separated for more than four decades.

The colonel and his wife lived the life of an Air Force pilot. Through the 1950s and '60s, they moved often as he worked his way up the ranks, reaching command pilot status. Then, in the late '60s, Colonel Mason was pulled from his assignment at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., to fly the C-130A Hercules in the Vietnam conflict. The Air Force needed command pilots, and colonels still fly combat missions.

The family, including two children in high school, moved to Okinawa, Japan. The colonel was home off and on between missions. He made sure his family was ready for the worst.

"He always left his ring in his service dress pocket," Irene said. "He told me, 'Irene, my wedding band is in the top left pocket. I can't tell you what we're doing or when I'll be back.'"

On May 22, 1968, Colonel Mason didn't return. His C-130A and its nine-man crew crashed somewhere in Laos. Eventually, Irene moved her family back to the United States and continued to live her life. But there was always a hole.

"I knew he died doing what he loved," she said with a hint of a tear in her eye. "He died with his crew, and that was almost enough. I knew someone was looking for his body, but after a few years you begin to wonder how hard they were looking."

Somebody was indeed looking for him. In fact, an entire command was looking for Colonel Mason, his crew and more than 80,000 other fallen heroes throughout the world. Known as the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, this unique task force scours old records, interviews witnesses and deploys to remote locations to find, identify and recover the remains of American servicemembers. Until recently, it was the only unit in the world actively looking for and recovering fallen servicemembers.

This dog tag belonging to Col. William Mason was found by members of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command at the crash site of his C-130A Hercules in Laos.

photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

JPAC is a self-sufficient unit. Active-duty members are assigned to the unit according to the percentage of missing servicemembers from each branch. Additionally, each service brings its strengths to the search. For the Air Force that means airlift. But the JPAC also has Airmen serving as team leads, logisticians, analysts and photographers. For Staff Sgt. April Quintanilla, the chance to be a forensic photographer for JPAC has been a career high point despite long and frequent trips abroad.

"JPAC is like a combination between Indiana Jones and CSI," Quintanilla said. "There are researchers who study old records and data, trying to find likely places to look for servicemembers. If we find them, we recover the remains under the leadership of an anthropologist and bring the remains back to the lab to identify the individual before notifying the next of kin. During the excavation, I photograph every piece of bone or personal effect, when I'm not digging."

Though every JPAC recovery is different, each usually begins with research. For example, Master Sgt. William Refenes, an intel analyst by trade, pores over military records and accident reports to try to pinpoint the location.

"When we find a region with between 10 to 13 potential sites, we'll send a five-man team to the area to try and narrow down potential dig sites," he said.

Sergeant Refenes said the typical team includes a team lead, anthropologist, explosive ordnance disposal technician, medic and team sergeant. A linguist and a photographer also may be added. These teams meet with locals and listen to firsthand accounts before heading to recovery sites. Sometimes they find what they're looking for; sometimes they find something else.

"When you're looking for plane crashes from the Vietnam War, the firsthand accounts are often clouded," he said. "A villager may remember seeing a plane crash or finding one, but they often can't remember where exactly they found it. Sometimes it's not even American, but even finding a Japanese crash site allows us to check that site off the list and narrows down the possibilities."

photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

The MIA bracelet of Col. William Mason was on the wrist of Lt. Col. Brian Buck, JPAC's director of communications and information, for 17 years. Colonel Buck got the bracelet from his wife, who wore it for three years. Colonel Buck escorted Colonel Mason's remains to Arlington National Cemetery and presented the bracelet to Irene Mason.

Irene Mason hugs a portrait of her husband, Col. William Mason, at her home in Austin, Texas. Colonel Mason and his crew were missing in action for 41 years until discovered by the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Laos in 2009. Colonel Mason now rests at Arlington National Cemetery.

Once a potential dig site is found, the coordinates are recorded and brought back to JPAC headquarters at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. If a determination is made to excavate the site, a team of about 16 people is assembled and sent for up to 45 days.

"I love the field work," Sergeant Quintanilla said. "It's like a big family out there. Everyone does his part. The

photo courtesy of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command

The sun sets in the hills of India. Members of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command travel to areas such as Papua New Guinea, Southeast Asia and India to find crash sites.

An aircraft engine is all that is visible at a crash site. The jungles of Southeast Asia quickly cover the remains of fallen servicemembers, making the job of locating them more difficult than in some other locations.

photographers document any findings, the anthropologist directs the dig and records findings, EOD sweeps the area for UXOs, but most of the time is spent with shovels and screens."

Sergeant Quintanilla said every team member either digs or screens the collected dirt for remains or artifacts. After decades in the ground, remains can be tiny — a fragment of bone or a single tooth. The anthropologist examines every potential find to ensure that even the smallest piece of evidence isn't discarded.

"The anthro will go through a bucket that looks like it's full of rocks and sticks," Sergeant Quintanilla said. "They'll be tossing stuff one after the other — 'stick, rock, twig, rock' — until they find something that looks like everything else but is really a piece of bone."

The anthropologist leads at the dig site. Like an archeological excavation, the site is divided into sections and delicately searched. Remains and personal effects are taken to JPAC for identification.

Dr. Sean Tallnan said the opportunity to work in the best skeletal laboratory in the world enables him to provide answers to families.

"Working with the military lends a tremendous amount of professionalism to the dig sites," he said. "This job involves a lot of travel to remote locations, and the military has the logistical expertise to make it happen.

photo courtesy of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command

"THEY'LL BE TOSSING STUFF ONE AFTER THE OTHER — 'STICK, ROCK, TWIG, ROCK' — UNTIL THEY FIND SOMETHING THAT LOOKS LIKE EVERTHING ELSE BUT IS REALLY A PIECE OF BONE."

— Staff Sgt. April Quintanilla

They allow us to do the job to a very high standard."

No doubt can remain before a servicemember can be positively identified and the identification released, Dr. Tallnan said. Dental identification, skull reconstruction and modeling, and mitochondrial DNA analysis must all point to the same individual. Sometimes a case remains open for years before identification can be ascertained.

"In the end, it's all about giving families closure," Tallnan said. "We're providing answers to families about the sacrifice their loved ones made defending this country."

Closure, even after decades of questions, means different things to different families. For Irene Mason, it means she has her husband again.

"When I visited JPAC after they

called me to tell me Bill was found, all they could show me from the crash was a little piece of bone the size of a fingernail," she said. "After so many years, I didn't want to give it back. It was precious to me. I'd hug it and set it down, then I'd pick it up again and hug it once more."

Her husband's repatriation was even more special, she said, because remains from the entire missing crew were brought back. At a group ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Irene met the relatives of her husband's crew for the first time.

"WORKING WITH THE MILITARY LENDS A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF PROFESSIONALISM TO THE DIG SITES."

— Dr. Sean Tallnan

"It was like meeting family," she said. "I know it would have meant so much to Bill to know he was brought home with the crew he cared so much about."

Irene is extremely grateful to the JPAC workers for what they've done for her husband and his crew.

"If I could tell every family member about JPAC who is waiting to hear news, I would," she said. "JPAC brought Bill home to me. We were together for 19 years, were separated for 41 and now we're together again."

photo by Thiep Nguyen

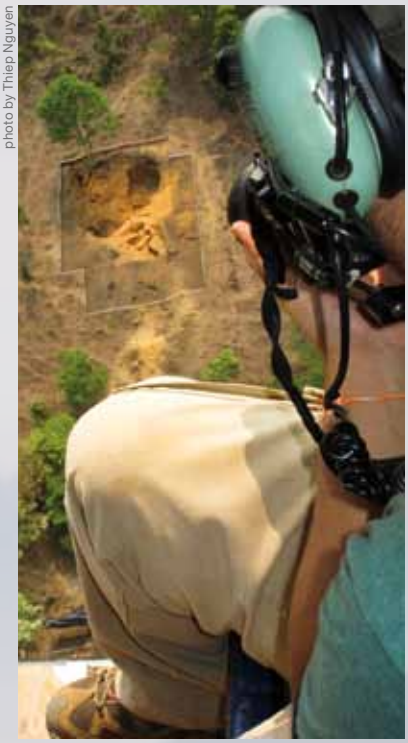


photo courtesy of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command

JPAC teams include forensic photographers, medics and other specialties but all team members cooperate to excavate and catalog human remains and artifacts from crash sites.

A forensic photographer snaps an aerial picture of an excavation site from a helicopter. Photographers document every aspect of excavation sites for anthropologists to reference during the identification process.

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON ✪ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. DESIREE N. PALACIOS

NEVER SAY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

RETIRED AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATOR COMPETES IN INAUGURAL WARRIOR GAMES

The noise from the cheering crowds and buzz of the starting signal reverberates off the walls of the U. S. Olympic Training Center's pool as swimmers compete in the 50-meter backstroke. For one of them, the cool water during the qualifying round of the first Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., offers some relief from the permanent pain in his legs caused by a 10-year-old injury.

That he can feel pain in his paralyzed legs should be impossible, but for retired Air Force Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan, the word impossible doesn't hold the same meaning as it does for most people. After all, swimming competively with legs that provide nothing but ballast might be thought of as impossible.

As the starting signal sounds, Sergeant Morgan and his fellow wounded veterans rush across the pool. Intense training from the previous week has turned the swimmers into water-treading machines.

Flashes from dozens of cameras freeze the practiced movements in time. Right arm up, stroke, left arm up, stroke. The mechanics of good form make the movement look easy. To a spectator, only the wobble of his legs as they are tugged along in the water belies the fact that he is paralyzed.

Paralysis doesn't define this wounded, but not beaten, Airman. Instead, losing the use of his legs taught him to define himself by things that can't be taken away.

"In the Air Force, I was a combat meteorologist," he said. "In the special operations

Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan uses a custom-designed race wheelchair for track events. The rear wheels are slanted and the chair is specifically made to be as aerodynamic as possible. Sport chairs come in many varieties, allowing athletes to race, play basketball and compete in many other sports.

(Left) Sport wheelchairs like these are used for basketball.

Nepal, an assistance dog, uses his nose to open the door at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., for retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan. Morgan was a combat meteorologist. He suffered a spinal cord injury during a special operations mission in South America that left him paralyzed from the waist down.

community, I feel like I based my life on who I was and what I did for the Air Force. When that was taken away I felt like I had nothing left. This wheelchair has been a character-building experience for me."

It was on a mission to South America in 1999 that his character-building lessons began. On the way back from a mission, the vehicle he was riding in rolled down a ravine. Sergeant Morgan was thrown from the vehicle and landed facedown in stagnant water. The vehicle landed on top of him. His back was crushed, his lungs collapsed. Only a chance encounter saved his life.

"Fortunately for me an American missionary was there in Ecuador and, as he drove the road, he noticed the vehicle at the bottom of the ravine. He thought it might be a fresh accident. So, as he was running down there, he just about stumbled over me," he said. "He pulled me up and carried me up the hill to his vehicle. He had a shortwave radio and was able to call the ambulance. The ambulance would be three hours. I was gasping for every breath. Both my lungs were collapsed and full of water. The missionary said, 'This guy doesn't have three hours.'"

Knowing Sergeant Morgan couldn't wait for the ambulance to make the three-hour drive, the missionary decided to meet the ambulance halfway. He removed the seats from his van and put Sergeant Morgan and two other injured servicemembers inside as carefully as possible. The missionary arrived at the rendezvous point just as Sergeant Morgan stopped breathing. The medics were able to insert a chest tube in Sergeant Morgan and get him to a hospital.

Within 24 hours, Sergeant Morgan was back in the United States in an induced coma as doctors fought to save his life. In addition to his injuries, an infection was growing in his lungs from the stagnant water he'd inhaled.

Sergeant Morgan awoke from the coma six weeks later. His wife and five children were there to greet him. They saw the same person on the outside, but Sergeant Morgan had to redefine who he was on the inside. The reality of his drastically changed life threatened to rob him of his identity. Taking on tough challenges was something he was used to from his special operations career, and it helped carry him through recovery and retirement.

"When I woke up from the coma, the doctor told me that I suffered a spinal cord injury, that I would never walk again," Sergeant Morgan said. "I remember thinking for a split second, 'There's no way.' So, I immediately replied, 'Yes I will.' The doctor was like, 'I'm sorry. You won't. The extent of the damage was severe.' I said, 'You

"THIS EVENT HAS MADE ME FEEL LIKE A PART OF THE AIR FORCE AGAIN."

— Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan

Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan pushes his wheelchair to his swimming lane before competing in the 50-meter backstroke.

Top: Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan dribbles the basketball during a game against the Marines in the inaugural Warrior Games held in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Sergeant Morgan takes a break during swim practice. Sergeant Morgan competes in the 50-meter backstroke.

know what? I will walk again. See, I'm moving my toes right now.' The doctor replied, 'No, you're not moving your toes.' I said, 'I am. It's just too small for you to see it.'"

Sergeant Morgan said that in the first years of recovery, he had to come to grips with the fact that he would never walk again. He learned to accept it, though it took time.

"I was thoroughly convinced that within 10 years I would be cured," he said. "I wrote in a magazine article that in 10 years I would run a marathon. It's been 10 years since I was hurt and I'm obviously not able to run, but I have found ways to compete."

The scars from 11 back surgeries are visible as Sergeant Morgan hauls himself out of the pool. A slight wince is the only indication of the pain from crushed nerves in his back and legs. He looks at the clock. He qualified. It's a good start for the day.

With little time to change and eat, he makes his way to another building where his Air Force wheelchair basketball teammates await. For him, the team and the Warrior Games make him part of the Air Force again.

"I miss the Air Force a lot," he said as he made his way to the gym. "I was hurt right before 9/11. Being in special operations after that happened, and knowing that all my friends were deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq, I felt it was what I was trained to do and I needed to be there with my buddies, fighting along beside them. I can't tell you how bad I miss it. That's the nice thing about this. It makes me feel part of the team again, part of the family."

During the opening ceremony, Juan M. Garcia III, the assistant Secretary of the Navy for manpower and Reserve affairs, noted that the Warrior Games were created by the U.S. Olympics Committee and the Department of Defense to demonstrate the indomitable spirit of wounded veterans. More than 200 wounded servicemembers competed in three days of Paralympic-style competition in nine sports including archery, shooting, track and swimming.

For Sergeant Morgan, rejoining the Air Force family through sports combines who he was with who he has become. It is through sports that he found a way to do what many believe is impossible.

In addition to the backstroke and wheelchair basketball events, he competed in the 400 and 1500-meter wheelchair races. Competing in the Warrior Games was another box to check off of his to-do list because he plans to join the U.S. Paralympics team.

Perhaps it's his innate competitiveness or his refusal to admit something is impossible. Sergeant Morgan used the Warrior Games to prove otherwise.

"Out of anything I've done, this has been the greatest thing for me," he said. "One of the hardest things after I got hurt was receiving the letter saying I was permanently retired from the Air Force. I was hoping that through some miraculous chance I would start walking again one day. Obviously it didn't happen. This event has made me feel like a part of the Air Force again."

Sergeant Morgan's wife, Christina, noticed the increased optimism and excitement the Warrior Games ignited in him.

"Jason was not only excited to be part of a team again, but thrilled to be part of his Air Force team," she said. "The Warrior Games gave him more courage than fears and more gains than losses. He is looking forward to next year."

In February, Sergeant Morgan raced a half-marathon. In November, he's scheduled for a full marathon. With each new challenge and each success Sergeant Morgan is proving that though things may seem impossible a change in perspective can prove it otherwise.

Above: Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan, in blue, pushes hard during the 1,500-meter wheelchair race in an attempt to overtake the lead racer.

Sergeant Morgan earned a silver medal in the 1,500-meter wheelchair race.

Cadet 4th Class Nate Lebens holds Apollo, a male gyr-peregrine falcon. Apollo is one of the performers for U.S. Air Force Academy football games.

Feathered Aces

CADETS TRAIN FALCONS TO WOW THE CROWDS

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON
PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. BENNIE J. DAVIS III

The falcon's dark eyes stared ahead as razor-sharp talons dug into a gloved fist, just before he used the hand of the U.S. Air Force Academy cadet handler as a personal flightline. The bird's target was a leather lure held by another cadet 100 yards away.

Cadet falconers call this male falcon Ace. He is a hybrid white gyrsaker falcon, a breeding that combines the size of the Arctic gyrfalcon with the aggression of the saker.

"I CALL [ACE] THE F-16 OF THE GROUP."

— Cadet 2nd Class Jeremiah Baxter

Master falconers believe this is the perfect combination for the Academy birds that fly during halftime of college football games.

Ace is an appropriate name for the falcon his main handler describes as "the F-16 Fighting Falcon" of McIntyre Mews, the home of the falconry program.

"I call him the F-16 of the group," said Cadet 2nd Class Jeremiah Baxter, who as cadet-in-charge of the falconry team is the primary handler for the Academy's top flying falcon. "The F-16 [aircraft] is extremely agile with the ability of doing flips and other amazing feats. That's really Ace's characteristic. You can always tell when you pick him up in his pen because he's always at his door, amped up and ready to go."

The Academy's falcons perform for 500,000 to 600,000 people each year at sporting events and educational demonstrations nationwide. The first Academy class selected the falcon as its mascot in 1955. A peregrine falcon named Mach 1 was the original mascot, but the first falcon to fly at an Academy football game was Lucifer on Oct. 20, 1956.

Twelve cadet falconers make up the Academy's falconry team, with four chosen each year to replace graduating seniors. New cadet falconers begin training in January under upperclassmen, the officer-in-charge and master falconer Sam Dollar. Daily duties include feeding, checking each bird's health, training, cleaning the mews and maintaining equipment. Cadets must pass the Colorado Department of Wildlife raptor licensing exam before being admitted into the program.

Cadets in previous classes sometimes called the falcons "feathered missiles." While the falcons never become pets, today's cadets develop a natural affection for them. Many of the birds earn nicknames from the cadets, based on their personalities and individual characteristics. Cody is "Grandpa." Echo is "Oscar the Grouch."

Aurora, the Academy's official mascot, is affectionately known as "our little diva." The gyrfalcon can be aggressive to the point of "demonic," as some falconers describe her. However, the "little diva" knows when she's on stage and turns into an ideal performer at football games and educational demonstrations.

"When she's squawking, you just know she's angry, and she wants you to get out of her pen," said Cadet 2nd Class Ryan Wichman. He has been wounded by Aurora four times in the two years he's worked with her.

"But you take her to football games or special events and she perks right up and is one of the prettiest animals I've ever seen," Cadet Wichman said.

Falcons become accustomed to people through a crucial process called manning, said John Van Winkle, an assistant falconry officer in charge who has worked with the program since 2001.

Once a baby falcon, or eyass, is about 8 weeks old, it is fitted with a connecting strap, called a jess, and

DID YOU KNOW

✪ **Mach 1 was the first Air Force Academy mascot from 1955-56. The tundra peregrine falcon was lost while filming "Wings of Tomorrow" in 1956 but survived in the wild for another four years, before he was found dead near Littleton, Colo.**

✪ **Lucifer was the first bird to perform at a football game when the Air Force played the Colorado School of Mines, Oct. 20, 1956. He was one of a quartet of prairie falcons given to the Academy as a gift in June of that year.**

✪ **Hungry became the first falcon to perform at a night game with President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the crowd at George Washington University Stadium. Later, one of his tail feathers went to the moon on Apollo 15.**

✪ **A parachute was devised to slow Titanium because the falcon was such a strong flyer. When Titanium grabbed the lure during performances, a drag chute deployed to keep him in the stadium.**

Cadet 2nd Class Yagie Janisch feeds Buzz, a 1-year-old male kestrel falcon. Buzz came to the Academy from the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center.

These three gyrfalcon eggs are a product of the falconry team's breeding program.

Cadet 1st Class Jeremiah Baxter, cadet-in-charge of the cadet falconry team, pulls the lure as Ace, a black gyrsaker falcon, makes a pass at it.

Oblio, a tundra peregrine falcon, was a gift to the Academy. Originally trained to hunt by a local falconer, Oblio is now a presentation bird for educational programs.

then a hood. The falcon is quiet while covered by the hood. The first step in the manning process is to train the falcon to sit quietly on "the fist," or the falconer's heavily gloved hand.

The next step involves encouraging the falcon to jump a few inches and eventually a foot from its perch to the falconer's fist for food. The distance gradually increases to 10 to 20 feet and the leash is soon replaced by a creance, which resembles a kite string. The falcon soon progresses to jump to a lure instead of food in the falconer's hand. The lure is a small leather pouch with a piece of quail meat.

Once the falcon repeatedly leaves the fist and flies directly to the lure, it is ready to fly free, Van Winkle said. The bird is fitted with a transmitter the size of a small thimble that allows it to be found if it doesn't return on its own.

Many cadet falconers could hardly recognize a falcon before they began preparing for the licensing exam. But, they often recognize the draw to joining the team.

Working with the birds can fill a void, as it did for Cadet 2nd Class Calder Goc. The cadet from Florida found herself needing something to care for after arriving at the Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., three years ago.

"My mother went to law school when I was in high school, and her school started about the same time my little brothers got out of their school," Cadet Goc said. "I kind of raised them for two years. But, when I got here I didn't have anything to take care of, so I felt lost. When I heard about this, I thought it was an awesome opportunity."

The cadet's caring instinct really kicked in when Buzz, an American kestrel falcon, arrived at the mews. The 1-year-old bird had a damaged wing and weighed 100 grams when he arrived after he was rescued and rehabilitated at the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center about a year ago.

The kestrel is unique in many ways, other than being the smallest, now weighing 107 grams. He makes a sound like a rubber duck and isn't housed in a pen like the other falcons, but is in the front area of the mews, which makes him the center of attention. He gets plenty of notice from the cadets, especially Cadet Goc.

"In the beginning, I just made sure I held him every day," Cadet Goc said. "That way, he knew he was

DID YOU KNOW

✪ **Cody, a 17-year-old wild prairie falcon, flew for a record nine seasons until 2001 and remains in the Academy's mews. Cadets affectionately call him "Grandpa."**

✪ **While Jock was in Tokyo practicing for a performance at the Mirage Bowl in 1981, the captive-bred falcon strayed from the area. He was later recovered and given to Tokyo's Tama Zoo.**

getting cared for. We still feed him piece-by-piece, straight to his mouth. It gets him to trust you because he knows you're not going to hurt him; you're just giving him food."

If Cadet Baxter can describe his favorite falcon as an F-16, he and his fellow cadet falconers might be compared to the C-130 Hercules, the workhorse of the Air Force's inventory. Academy cadets already have a demanding schedule, but falconers also commit to the almost daily care for the residents of McIntyre Mews, along with extensive travel to represent the Academy and the Air Force as they educate people of all ages about falcons.

"It's not easy, but you get to a point where you have to judge what you do with your extracurricular activities," Cadet Baxter said. "You ask yourself if it's worth it and you have to really know that what you're doing is making a difference. A lot of times, when you get to talk to little kids like we do, you know it's definitely worth it.

"That's why I like to call us a team because it gives us more of an identity."

Academy and the Air Force. Things have changed just a tad about the mews, but that hasn't."

Something else that remains the same about Academy falconry is the impact of a falcon in the Colorado sky on a college football crowd. Cadet handlers display the falcons on the sideline during the first half of Academy games. Shortly before halftime, the backup bird and handler position themselves high in the stands where the falcon can be released in case anything goes wrong with the primary flier. The primary falcon is then taken to the top of the stadium where it can see its handler at midfield swinging the lure. The bird is then released and dives immediately for the lure.

"The football games are great, especially for the cadets," Colonel Rhymer said. "They usually only get to work the games a couple of times, usually as seniors. You spend three years in the program and get to go in front of a crowd and show them what the bird can do. I remember when I did it. It was really cool to stand out there, spend the lure, have the bird

at the game," Cadet Baxter said. "The crowd is kind of going crazy and it never fails that the birds are always going so much faster at the games. I think they hear the crowd and think it's time to amp it up."

While watching falcons interact with the cadet falconers, it's easy to forget they are wild animals, no matter how well trained. Like any undomesticated animal, they are still prone to unexpected behavior, as Ace showed when he singlehandedly changed when Academy falcons perform during a game. Dollar, who has worked with his own falcons and Academy falconry for decades, saw Ace do something at a night game two seasons ago that almost left him speechless.

"Once Ace got outside the lights, he couldn't see anymore," Dollar said. "As the teams were setting up, practicing, one of the team's punters was punting the ball and he'd come out of the black sky and attack the football. Then, the opposing team would do the same thing and Ace would come flying through the air and hit their ball. The ball is leather, so it looks

Cadet 4th Class Paul McArthur, left, prepares to weigh Destiny, a gray-phase gyrfalcon while Cadet 3rd Class Jennifer Flynn and Cadet 3rd Class Michael O'Kelley review Destiny's weight and feeding records and familiarize Cadet 4th Class Danielle Cortez, right, with the procedures. Destiny turned 17 this summer.

Retired Col. Larry Schaad, a former falconry program director, visited the mews recently and talked about what that team identity means to the program.

"The birds were great, but the cadets were what were special," Colonel Schaad said after his tour. "These kids are truly special and tremendous ambassadors for the

do what it was supposed to do and give a demonstration in front of thousands of people."

Even the main handler for the Academy's ace flying falcon sometimes finds himself amazed at what the bird can do.

"You can see him fly out here at practice, but you can never get fully prepared for what you'll experience

like their lure. The incident threatened to delay kickoff, so now we can't fly pre-game anymore."

Still, Ace's unprovoked attack on the football demonstrated how effectively falcons are trained at the Academy. Falconers just prefer their birds limit their targets to the leather on the lure instead of footballs.

DID YOU KNOW

✪ **Baffin was the official Air Force Academy mascot for 13 years before she died in 1978. She was mounted and has been permanently displayed in Arnold Hall.**

✪ **Glacier, another white-phase gyrfalcon, was the mascot for more than 15 years before he died in 1995. He's now on display in the Field House.**

✪ **Athol was a white-phase gyrfalcon taken from the wild in Greenland with the permission of the Danish government in 1960. After the falcon died in 1969, it was mounted and remains on display in the Academy Library.**

✪ **Blizzard was a 17-year-old white-phase gyrfalcon when given to the Academy in 1992. The falcon died in 1994 and was mounted and is now displayed in the Department of Biology.**

***Source:** "Falconry at the United States Air Force Academy – The Story of the Cadets' Unique Performing Mascot," by the late retired Lt. Gen. A.P. Clark. General Clark was the sixth Academy superintendent.*

Brothers in Healing

AN INSPIRATIONAL FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN A WOUNDED SOLDIER AND HIS RESCUER HELPS BOTH RECOVER

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

Blood streamed down both sides of his face. Sounds of explosions and soldiers dying also haunted Capt. Kevin Lombardo's dreams, but it was the blood that distressed him. "Whose blood is this?" he wanted to know. "Where did it come from?"

From this bloody nightmare and a violent day in Iraq on an early spring day in 2008 developed the most inspirational friendship of Captain Lombardo's life. Another symbol from that day was the tattoo on the arm of the bleeding and burned soldier. Two years after the attack that killed three soldiers, the captain and the man he saved see the tattoo as a symbol of the bond they now share, one that allowed each man to lean on and learn from the other as he worked through his own recovery.

DENYING DEATH

The lives of the captain and the Army sergeant intersected near the main gate at Contingency Operating Base Adder, Iraq, on March 12, 2008. A rocket struck the armored Suburban carrying Sgt. Joel Tavera and four other soldiers, 12 days before his 21st birthday. The explosion killed three in the vehicle and critically injured Sergeant Tavera and the other survivor. Captain Lombardo, an Air Force security forces officer serving as provost marshal for the base, saw the rocket hit the truck and found the sergeant on fire from his torso to his head and bleeding profusely from his right leg.

"This kid's not going to die," the captain told himself after he moved Sergeant Tavera to a safe distance from where he found him just a couple of feet from the truck. "No way am I going to let him die."

Captain Lombardo put a tourniquet on Sergeant Tavera's leg while another soldier removed his own gear and wrapped it around the wounded sergeant's head to protect him from another possible attack and from ammunition "cooking off," or exploding, from the truck. As it happened, six other rockets struck within seconds of the explosion that hit the Suburban. The enemy hit the base 22 times that morning.

A TATTOO AND A BOND

Captain Lombardo spent the next half-hour talking to Sergeant Tavera to keep him awake, as he had learned in the Combat Lifesaver Course. They talked about Sergeant Tavera's parents and the fact that his father was a former Marine. They compared hometowns – the captain talked about Cleveland, Ohio, while the sergeant told him about growing up in Havelock, N.C., and how he was looking forward to seeing his family and friends. They even talked about Sergeant Tavera's favorite Major League Baseball team, the New York Mets, and his upcoming birthday. Then Captain Lombardo removed Sergeant Tavera's shirt to insert an IV and he saw the tattoo on the right

photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

Capt. Kevin Lombardo and Army Sergeant Joel Tavera have forged a bond from their suffering. Sergeant Tavera was injured during a mission. Captain Lombardo was the first person to administer aid to the sergeant.

photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

Captain Lombardo visited Sergeant Tavera at hospitals in Florida and Texas. The two formed a lasting bond they each credit for helping him deal with the physical and mental aspects of healing after the mission that left Sergeant Tavera with the second-worst condition of any surviving military member in Iraq.

arm. The tattoo was an image of a cross and the words Hebrews 4:12, but the captain's focus was on the numbers.

"At that time we were still talking about his 21st birthday," Captain Lombardo said. "All I saw was the 4:12 and April 12th is my birthday. The tattoo was the only part of his torso that didn't burn. It just helped me to keep talking and talking to him."

Sergeant Tavera was still conscious and talking when Captain Lombardo heard what he called "the best sound I could possibly think of at the time." That sound was the siren of an ambulance and other security forces members — Tech. Sgt. Joe Holmes, Staff Sgt. Rueben Martinez and Airman 1st Class Cody Colston — arriving for the two survivors. The attack left Sergeant Tavera with a fractured skull and critical burns over 60 percent of his body, and he lost both eyes, four fingers and the lower part of his right leg. He was evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany and later to the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research Burn Center at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. Sergeant Tavera slipped into a coma once inside the ambulance and didn't awaken for 81 days.

Back in Iraq, Captain Lombardo faced the aftermath of the attack, including a memorial service for the three soldiers killed in the explosion. Several months later, after he'd returned to his home station at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., he began to feel the emotional repercussions of seeing three comrades die so violently. Captain Lombardo felt guilty because he couldn't save all five soldiers.

"I kept thinking if only I could've gotten them out of the truck, and I questioned myself for not getting them out," he said. "The smell, sounds, sights, touch and even the taste are still there from that day. At the time I was back at Peterson, you go from being in (Iraq) to the normal day-to-day setting on an Air Force base. Physically I was fine, but I knew I wasn't as mentally sharp as I was."

He was having trouble sleeping and when he could sleep, there were nightmares, including the one with the blood. Captain Lombardo knew he was suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, but he didn't want to go to mental health for counseling because he was concerned the stigma would put his security clearance, not to mention his job, in jeopardy. Fortunately, his former commander assured him it wouldn't affect either and encouraged him to get the help he needed.

"We didn't even talk about the incident the first couple of times," he said about the counseling. "We just talked about how I was feeling and things like that. A couple of weeks in, we really started talking about it and I started writing things down I didn't remember before, certain events that started coming more into focus about that day."

SHARING THE PAIN

The captain repeatedly called the hospital to check on Sergeant Tavera. One day he spoke with Sergeant Tavera's father, Jose, who told him his son had woken from the coma and was slowly improving. Just hearing good news about Sergeant Tavera's recovery, especially after he began reaching milestones in steps he was able to walk, helped Captain Lombardo in his own recovery from PTSD.

"(Sergeant Tavera's father) told me Joel was fighting every day and made

NEW RULES FOR PTSD

In July, Veterans Affairs simplified the application process for benefits related to PTSD.

The new policy also allows those who served in noncombat roles to receive benefits.

The regulation is expected to speed access to medical care and benefits.

More than 400,00 Veterans are currently receiving benefits for service connected PTSD.

For more information, go to www.va.gov or call 1-800-827-1000.

the statement that he wanted to live," Captain Lombardo said. "His inspiration and fight made me realize I needed to stop second-guessing myself for that day."

When Sergeant Tavera was transferred to the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Fla., Captain Lombardo accepted a temporary duty assignment with U.S. Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base outside Tampa in June 2009. His flight was scheduled for June 20, the date of Sergeant Tavera's Purple Heart ceremony. When he found out, Captain Lombardo caught an earlier flight so he could make the ceremony. While he was in Tampa, the two spent a lot of time together, going to events such as Tampa Bay Lightning hockey games and a performance by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. But, like on the day of the attack, the most significant moments for both were their conversations.

"It was comforting to know I wasn't the only person hurting," Sergeant Tavera said. "It was also nice to know he was there that day. When I really needed someone, he was the first person there. I never thought after being saved I'd actually have the chance to hang out with him and talk to him."

The talks helped Sergeant Tavera deal with the pain and difficulties that came with his surgeries and treatment. He wore a hat for a long time to cover the part of his skull that was missing while he endured more than 50 skin grafts. The budding friendship also helped Captain Lombardo. Even though he never let his PTSD symptoms affect his family life, his wife, Billie, could see the friendship's role in his recovery.

"When Kevin got home from Iraq that year, I knew he had been through so much," she said. "Although he adjusted with me and the kids, he was having a hard time sleeping and always asked if he could have done more with Sergeant Tavera and the other soldiers. After he was invited and attended Sergeant Tavera's Bronze Star and Purple Heart Ceremony, his outlook changed. I believe that being with Joel in Tampa helped them both heal from that horrific day. It brought a little closure, but also opened a door to their incredible future together. I have been with them and Joel's parents and they are much more than friends ... they are family now."


courtesy photo


courtesy photo


courtesy photo

LIKE A SECOND CHILD

Tavera's family thinks of the man who saved their only son like he is a second child. They were at the airport when he returned from another Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment. They've also watched their son fight back from a condition doctors told them was the second-worst of any surviving military member in Iraq, to being well on his way to recovery. The ceremony was the first time they met the captain, yet Sergeant Tavera's mother, Maritza, greeted him like a family member who had just come home.

"When they told me he was the guy who saved my son, I told him, 'I already love you.' Even though I'd never met him, in my heart I knew him already. I always call him our angel. He's not just a friend. He's part of our family now."

"I think it was a blessing to have them together in Tampa for those six months," Sergeant Tavera's father said. "Being together helped both of them learn to cope. Joel's doing much better and he doesn't feel sorry for himself. They see each other go through what they have to go through and believe they can do it, too. They can say things to each other they can't say to anyone else."

When Sergeant Tavera returned to Brooke Army Medical Center this spring for more skin grafts, Captain Lombardo was also in San Antonio. He's now director of operations of the 343rd Training Squadron and Security Forces Academy at Lackland Air Force Base. Because Sergeant Tavera is still in the Army, the two men are careful to avoid crossing the line between officer and enlisted, although he says he can't wait to retire so he can call his friend by his first name.

"Obviously, you have that line with officer and enlisted," Captain Lombardo said. "The line's still there with us, but it merged a lot on March 12, 2008, just as the line did between Army and Air Force. He's my new wingman and I'm hopefully his battle buddy now. We are family now."

The friendship played a major part in Captain Lombardo's recovery from the trauma he saw that Tuesday morning in Iraq two years ago, along with the help he received to deal with the symptoms. And he learned the source of the blood in that recurring nightmare. After Sergeant Tavera was taken from the scene, a firefighter poured a bottle of saline over the captain's head and hands to wash blood from his face. The blood was from Sergeant Tavera's injuries. Learning the reason for that dream helped, along with his new friendship.

Sergeant Tavera no longer has to wear the hat because his head is whole again. Captain Lombardo no longer dreams of blood and death. He can now dream more pleasant things, like time spent with his wife and children or perhaps even his new best friend. Dealing directly with the issues he faced from the violent day in Iraq helped keep them from negatively affecting his career and family. But it also gave him a friendship that will last a lifetime.

Captain Kevin Lombardo and Sergeant Joel Tavera went to a hockey game, where the Captain captured this memory of Sergeant Tavera and the Tampa Bay Lightening cheerleaders.

Army Captain Kim Dindial, another friend of Sergeant Tavera, attended a Memorial Day event with the two at McDill Air Force Base, Fla.

Sergeant Tavera and his father were there in December 2009 when Captain Lombardo returned from another deployment. The Tavera family met the Captain as he deplaned at MacDill AFB, Fla.

A B-1B Lancer flies to where it will meet a KC-135 Stratotanker for fuel above Northern New Mexico. The Lancer is assigned to Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, and the Stratotanker is from McConnell AFB, Kan.

B-1 STILL ON THE GO

FLEX AND LOITER MAKE B-1 LONGEVITY LOGICAL

STORY BY JANIE SANTOS ✪ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. DESIREE N. PALACIOS

It's sleek and it's powerful, and it's the go-to airframe when combatant commanders want a show of force or support for ground troops.

The non-nuclear B-1 Lancer has adapted from a strategic mission to a close-air support role, and will continue to play an effective part in today's fight in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Lots of airplanes do certain things very well, but that's all they can do," said Col. Kenneth R. Tatum Jr., 7th Bomb Wing vice commander at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. "They are not as versatile or have the capability to flex as the B-1."

Operating at approximately 20,000 feet, the B-1 waits, or loiters, with up to 35 tons of precision-guided weapons. When ground troops encounter the enemy, the bomber's aircrew can engage in minutes because of the B-1's readiness and speed.

The flexibility of the aircraft makes it attractive to combatant commanders.

"We're fast for what you might think a bomber can do," said Col. Charlie Catoe, 7th Operations Group commander at Dyess AFB. "The loiter time is exceptional so we don't require as much tanker time to stay and hang around over the fight.

"Afghanistan is a good-sized country and we can dash back and forth across it as we need to, if somebody needs help in a hurry," Colonel Catoe said.

"The predominance of what we are doing right now in theater is close-air support; nontraditional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and armed overwatch," Colonel Catoe, a Florida native, said. "We are supporting the troops on the ground."

When the Lancer flies low and fast over enemy combatants in a show of force, the 200,000-pound aircraft can intimidate them handily, like taking a gun to a mosquito with its massive airframe and rumbling engines.

"What makes us very useful in the current fight is that we have a large payload, we can carry a varied amount of weapons," the colonel said. "If you need to go kinetic, you have a lot of choices on what you can do."

Since the airframe continues to play an important role, Air Force and Air Combat Command officials are looking at ways to improve the venerable B-1, and to keep it lethal.

"We've been in constant upgrade on numerous systems," Colonel Catoe said. "The airplane never sits still. There are structural improvements that are ongoing as the airframe is not getting any younger."

Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Hicks has been a maintainer at Dyess since 1996. He worked his way through various jobs of increasing responsibility, and now he's an expediter with the 7th

(Clockwise) Staff Sgt. Scott James oils the accessory drive gear box on a B-1 Lancer during a routine maintenance check. Sergeant James is assigned to the 7th Air Maintenance Squadron.

Traditional tools still work on the B-1 Lancer. Even though the aircraft's mission has changed, maintenance remains the same.

A B-1B Lancer waits for the next mission.

Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Hicks (left) shows Staff Sgt. Christopher Blackwell and Airman 1st Class Antonio Herrera (center) a procedure from the technical manual. Every aspect of B-1 maintenance can be found, step by step, in the aircraft's maintenance publications.

Aircraft Maintenance Squadron with responsibility for the work on several aircraft.

"The mission may change, but what maintenance does stays the same," said Sergeant Hicks, who is from Temple, Texas.

The maintainers at Dyess can testify that the aircraft is a beast at times because of the complexity of its systems and, in some cases, aging components. Despite its age, the B-1 performs.

"Its capabilities are amazing," said Staff Sgt. Scott James, a dedicated crew chief with the 7th AMS. "Being overseas with the B-1 is a completely different experience than here. Seeing its capabilities while it's deployed makes it all worth it.

"When it lands, it may need something minor like a tire change, or an inspection to send it back up, or something major like changing the whole motor," Sergeant James, an Olney, Md., native, said. "It keeps us busy."

According to Sergeant Hicks, it's all in a day's work to keep the Dyess Lancers in the air so crews get their training flights accomplished and prepare for deployment.

During their deployment, a new "accessory" was added to the B-1 arsenal at the request of combatant commanders in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

Colonel Tatum said that the Sniper advanced targeting pod, an aftermarket addition to the airplane, has improved the B-1's utility.

"Two years ago we didn't have the pod over in Afghanistan and Iraq," he said. "Now, if you don't have it, they almost send you home. It adds so much to the warfighter over there."

With this tool, it's not just a matter of the pilot sending a precision weapon to an area; the Sniper ATP allows the pilot to send the weapon to the correct address.

As the B-1 nears its 25th anniversary, a new chapter could be opening for the bomber with an even more precise weapon, the airborne laser. The Air Force's chief scientist, Dr. Werner Dahm, flew on a Lancer from Dyess to see if there was enough room for the crew to operate the airborne laser platform in the cockpit while continuing to do their duties.

According to Colonel Tatum, the laser is capable of precision targeting and minimizes unintended damage when the enemy places hostile networks near schools. The Lancer could be carrying a prototype laser by 2014.

"The B-1 provides a platform to test this technology to see if we can operationalize a technological

concept," Colonel Tatum said.

Dyess is often referred to as the "Home of the B-1" because the units there train, equip and field people and weapons for the B-1. It's also where innovations are tested.

"We also have the weapons school people who work the tactical end of it," Colonel Catoe said.

"The B-1 is in the middle of an evolution," Colonel Tatum said. "We've gone from 'dumb' weapons to 'smart' or GPS-guided ones, to the targeting pod. We are evolving."

Flexibility, durability and adaptability are the key words used to describe how the B-1 evolved from an almost obsolete bomber to the go-to aircraft for close-air support and an airframe on the verge of being part of a "Star Wars" future.

Col. Kenneth R. Tatum, Jr., has flown the F-117 and the B-1. His next assignment in strategic aircraft systems at the Pentagon will benefit from that experience.

PILOT'S VIEW OF FIGHTER AND BOMBER

What's it like for a fighter pilot to fly a bomber or a bomber pilot to fly a fighter? Col. Kenneth R. Tatum, Jr., the 7th Bomb Wing vice commander at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, knows. He has perspective on both.

The colonel didn't compare the two aircraft, but he did concede that the big B-1 Lancer has its moments.

"The B-1 has variable geometric wings, where when placed forward, it flies at altitude similar to a B-52," he said. "Then we have the ability to quickly sweep the wings aft, where the aircraft performs much more like a fighter.

"It goes low. It goes fast. It feels like you're flying a fighter to a certain extent."

But, he explained with a laugh, the pilot of a B-1 can't pull nine G's or do loops.

"However, it really does feel like you're flying a very fast, relatively agile airplane, considering the monstrosity of its size," he said. "But the size is what gives you a significant increase in payload and range over fighters. You have to take everything into account."

Turning the clock back about 19 years, Colonel Tatum was on his first assignment after flight school and the B-1 was a Strategic Air Command asset. The focus in the nuclear age was protecting the country from the Soviet Bear — one enemy, one weapon.

"When I departed Dyess in 1995, we were just beginning to employ conventional weapons," Colonel Tatum said. "This leads to conventional tactics, day-to-day conventional warfighting. In other words, non-nuclear operations."

He left the bomber world and trained in the F-117 Nighthawk.

For almost 14 years, he was a fighter pilot, and one of the few F-117 pilots to deploy to Southwest Asia, Europe and Korea supporting combatant commanders. The colonel also commanded the last operational F-117 squadron in the Air Force, and was commander of the aircraft's final contingency deployment.

The Air Force retired the F-117 in 2008.

"I was fortunate to return to Dyess in July 2009," the Birmingham, Ala., native said. "It was not surprising, but insightful, to return to the B-1 world after 14 years and find that it looked just like the fighter community."

The colonel said the B-1 has the ability to focus its efforts, like the fighter community, by studying a wide array of air and ground threats from various countries.

"The vast number of weapons we can carry on the airplane creates options for the ground commander, whether you're in a close-air support role or a more traditional strategic or interdiction-type role," Colonel Tatum said.

"The B-1 has range," he said. "We carry enough fuel so that we don't always have to 'tank' on the way. Fighter aircraft have a shorter duration if you really want to get them somewhere fast. They're going to have to get some gas at some point.

"The B-1 can flex, respond and then we have a few hours of immediate capability, where a smaller aircraft may not," the colonel said. "It's a great tactical aircraft that has durability and adaptability."

— by Janie Santos

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON ✪ PHOTOS BY LANCE CHEUNG

A DREAM *on the* BAY

COUPLE VOTED MOST INSPIRATIONAL SET ASIDE CANCER WORRIES FOR A LAVISH WEDDING

Vanessa Muza Teskey and Capt. Mike Hawkins kiss during their ceremony atop the Hotel Vitale on San Francisco's waterfront. The couple, who have been dealing with Vanessa's cancer, won an elaborate wedding through an online contest decided by website voting.

A disc jockey played Peter Cetera's "The Glory of Love" while the Air Force captain danced the first dance with his new bride. Growing up as a tomboy in Wisconsin, the bride had always pictured herself getting married in a field and riding off on a dirt bike with her husband. Instead, she exchanged vows wearing a designer gown on a Port of San Francisco hotel balcony in front of family and friends. Her cancer seemed as far away as a seagull could fly.

Capt. Mike and Vanessa Hawkins married in late spring on the San Francisco waterfront in a $100,000 ceremony courtesy of a contest. For a few weeks, they could push aside her stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma for the extravagant event won in the San Francisco Dream Wedding Giveaway.

"It was definitely like a dream," Vanessa said. "Not only was I blessed with the opportunity to feel more beautiful than I have since my diagnosis, and possibly ever, but I was also able to share a day with the love of my life that didn't involve him having to carry me up the stairs or rub my back while I sleep for hours on end.

"Having so many people Mike and I love in one place, experiencing the amazing sights and celebrating our love with us was an experience like no other," she said. "It was a totally incredible experience Mike and I will certainly never forget."

An online contest provided the couple with a wedding package that included a ceremony at a luxury waterfront hotel, custom-designed rings and a honeymoon in nearby Napa. The prize also allowed the bride to temporarily set aside the sweatpants and T-shirts she wears for chemotherapy and radiation treatments for a white strapless Lee Ann Belter gown. The only visible sign of the bride's Hodgkin's lymphoma, which is usually widespread in the lymph nodes and other parts of the body such as lungs, liver or bone, was a bandage on her forearm.

Maid of honor Amie Muza Teskey noticed the positive effects the wedding activities had on her sister, especially the break it provided from dealing with cancer.

"This experience was exactly what Vanessa needed – an escape from her daily life of hospital visits and chemotherapy to a paradise where the wedding was planned for her," Teskey said. "I know she wasn't thinking about it while we were admiring the breathtaking backdrops of the rehearsal dinner and the actual ceremony and as she and Mike danced the night away at the reception. They were happy and not worried about her being sick, which was exactly what we all wanted for them and exactly what they deserved."

After a honeymoon in the Napa Valley, the couple settled into life in their Fairfax, Va., townhouse. Captain Hawkins began his duties as a contracting officer at his new duty station in Chantilly, Va., after a recent permanent change of station from Columbus Air Force Base, Miss., while his wife resumed her chemotherapy treatments as part of an experimental treatment and clinical trial.

"I think the whole process was the perfect reward for a young woman who has fought and is continuing to fight so courageously," Captain Hawkins said. "Vanessa absolutely deserved something like that, and that made it that much more enjoyable. That wedding was a great escape from reality, even if it was temporary, and a great way to celebrate our love for each other.

"We can't wait to get all of the pictures," he said, "and I know every time we look at them, for years down

the road, we'll be able to step outside of our everyday stresses and challenges and go back to that amazing time in San Francisco."

The couple met — exactly three years before their wedding day — at Columbus AFB after Vanessa graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy and he was commissioned through the University of Virginia's ROTC program. The couple were engaged in July 2008. Almost a year later, the day before the captain deployed to the Arabian gulf in May 2009, they learned her diagnosis.

They endured separation while she began her treatments with the help of the Columbus AFB community and family. During one of their video chats, Captain Hawkins shaved his head after his fiancé lost her hair from the chemotherapy. While he was deployed, she was in Wisconsin with her family, so both were apart from their friends in the squadron at Columbus.

"But they never forgot about me," Vanessa said.

One of her nurses in Wisconsin submitted the couple in the online dream wedding giveaway. The betrothed then wrote an essay and produced a video that told the story of their relationship and her battle with Hodgkin's. Captain Hawkins and his fiancé were among 350 couples in the contest that was to be decided by website voting.

The Air Force community quickly went to work, along with Vanessa's father, Van Teskey, in Wisconsin.

"I was getting calls from people on bases throughout the country who had heard about us," Captain Hawkins said. "People Air Force-wide had heard about us through the global network. Even people who didn't even know us were voting for us and sending it to old squadrons and church groups. They were telling people, 'This is an Air Force captain and they deserve this.'"

He returned from deployment in November and was with his fiancé on Valentine's Day when a team of photographers and videographers appeared at his mother's home in Stafford, Va., to tell them they were named "the most inspirational couple" in the contest.

"MIKE AND VANESSA'S STORY TOUCHED A LOT OF PEOPLE"

— Liz Guthrie, contest consultant

Liz Guthrie, a San Jose, Calif., wedding consultant with the contest, said many people were inspired by the couple's story. She since has created a nonprofit organization called Wish Upon a Wedding to plan small weddings for couples like the Hawkins.

"We were looking for someone who was facing illness, loss or hardship to give a wedding to, and the public determined the winner," Guthrie said. "Mike and Vanessa's story touched a lot of people and they won by a landslide. I think this is a great way for them to have a celebration with their family and friends and not have to think about her illness."

Vanessa resumed her treatments and she's already thinking past the cancer, to a future that includes nursing school and a family. Captain Hawkins and his new wife are grateful to the contest sponsors, their families and the Air Force community for the dream wedding day on the San Francisco Bay. They also are grateful for the support received after returning to Virginia. For instance, the captain arrived at work to find wedding bell confetti left on his desk by his supervisor.

"Even though I've only been at my current job for a little under two months, everyone took me and Vanessa in as family," Captain Hawkins said. "They have already offered more support than we can take advantage of, and this is on top of the Air Force family we left in Columbus, who all still keep in touch and send up daily prayers for us.

"The support and true friendship we've received from our Air Force family has been incredible and something neither of us will soon forget," he said.

"The Air Force network is incredible," Vanessa agreed.

Even though the biopsy results after their return to Virginia haven't been as encouraging as they had hoped, Vanessa remains optimistic she will beat the cancer, as evidenced by the bracelets she and her husband wear with the Bible verse Philippians 4:13 – "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." She gives credit for her positive attitude primarily to her faith, family, friends, upbringing and her years at the Academy.

"I would really like some of my classmates I lost touch with, along with my instructors, squadron leaders and other leadership at the Academy and in my short Air Force career, to understand the impact they had on my life and how they each personally contributed to my fight against cancer," she said.

"The experiences and struggles every cadet endures at the Academy truly bring out a part of you that you never imagined existed," Vanessa said. "The bonds you form with others based on shared challenges and seemingly impossible tasks are irreplaceable and inevitably build confidence and an unwavering positive attitude that serves to lift each other up when necessary.

"The bonds I have with the people [from the U.S. Air Force Academy] encourage and inspire me to keep fighting," she said. "If we all got through everything we did there, I can certainly get through this."

The contest gave the couple the wedding of their dreams, but their Air Force family is helping keep their dream alive as Vanessa continues her fight against cancer – a fight she has every intention of winning.

The newlyweds danced their first dance and enjoyed a reception at Hotel Vitale on the San Francisco waterfront. The two honeymooned in Napa Valley, Calif., before returning to Virginia. Captain Hawkins is back on duty and Vanessa continues her cancer treatments.

SOUTH DAKOTA STRONG

SECURITY FORCES AIRMAN TACKLES THE WORLD OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON
PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. JACK BRADEN

photo by Lance Cheung

Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson is a mixed martial arts fighter when not on duty as a security forces Airman at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. Her primary responsibilities include maintaining mobility readiness for her squadron and supporting mass casualty exercises.

The ring announcer steps awkwardly over the ropes of the Las Vegas ring. Wearing a suit, he parades around the blood-covered mat calling out the next pair of fighters. Behind the crowd, wearing blue headgear and pads, her blonde ponytail sticking up like a Roman centurion's helmet plume, Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson paces while anticipating the next six minutes.

At 115 pounds, Sergeant Nelson doesn't necessarily look like a mixed martial artist in her security forces uniform. When her shift is done, the beret and weapon are exchanged for grappling gloves and Muay Thai shorts. Scrapes and bruises that decorate her legs, arms and knuckles testify to her training regimen, which often includes sparring with men easily twice her size.

"We're all fighters here," Sergeant Nelson said, referring to the South Dakota gym where she trains with other Airmen. "I'm not afraid to train with dudes. It's a different level of intensity, and if I can hold my own against a 200-pound guy I'll be fine when I fight a chick in my weight class."

Her tenacity makes her more like one of the guys in a sport dominated by men. This disregard for her gender is evident from the way her trainers treat her in the ring.

"She's got as much fire in her as anyone here," said 1st Lt. Jason Carter, a medical readiness officer who also trains with Sergeant Nelson. "No one takes it easy on her because she's a woman. She can hold her own, and taking it easier on her would probably just [make her more angry]."

None of her training partners want to see her when she's mad. Sergeant Nelson is a lightweight only on the scale.

Fighting is a progressive part of Sergeant Nelson's life. She worked through the ranks of Taekwondo in her teen years, but when it wasn't enough of a challenge, she looked elsewhere, eventually joining the Air Force.

"After graduating high school, I waited tables for a year," Sergeant Nelson said. "I knew I wanted more of a challenge, so I joined the Air Force. I became a cop because I wanted to be in the thick of the fight."

image support by Lance Cheung

Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson weighs in before her bout.

(Below) Sergeant. Nelson faces her opponent in a Muay Thai fight. At the end of the season, four fighters will have earned a chance to train in Thailand under Muay Thai masters.

After basic training and technical school Sergeant Nelson eventually moved to Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. It was there that she was invited by another security forces Airman to visit the Dynamic Martial Arts gym where a few Airmen trained to fight at both amateur and pro levels. In the ring she's competing for a title.

"Fighting out of the blue corner, from Rapid City, South Dakota, Rachel," the announcer barks into the microphone. He says her name in a rolling voice, holding the last syllable for a second or two before Sergeant Nelson crosses to her corner.

She meets her opponent in the center of the ring and bumps gloves to signal the beginning of the fight. Sergeant Nelson and her opponent each take a step back before unleashing a violent volley.

I BECAME A COP BECAUSE I WANTED TO BE IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT.

— Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson

Sergeant Nelson's quick right jab and right front kick combination land, but her opponent lands a kick of her own to Sergeant Nelson's thigh. The next minute follows that pattern: punch, kick, punch, kick. The thwack of blows and the women's abrupt exhalations while throwing punches and kicks punctuate the noise of the crowd.

As if tiring of the steady kicks to her thigh, Sergeant Nelson catches her opponent's leg and with a quick open-palmed blow to the chest drops her adversary to the mat.

The referee resets the women, and the exchange of blows resumes. With her opponent keeping her distance, Sergeant Nelson delivers kick after kick while receiving only an occasional strike from her adversary. Like a patient predator, Sergeant Nelson looks for another mistake. When her foe ventures too close in an attempt to kick back, Sergeant Nelson sweeps out her supporting leg. Her opponent hits the mat for the second time; the intended roundhouse kick is useless from the flat-on-her-back position.

Before the first of three, two-minute rounds ends, Sergeant Nelson throws her enemy to the mat. Though her opponent lands punches of her own, they only seem to antagonize Sergeant Nelson.

At just 5-foot-4, Sergeant Nelson still looms over her opponent, who resorts to grabbing her and "locking up." Sergeant Nelson sends a knee to her opponent's ribs for the trouble.

The bell rings, signaling the end of round one. Sergeant Nelson returns to her corner but she isn't done and she hasn't lost her energy.

Working in a career field that deploys often, MMA offers many advantages and creates its own set of difficulties. Perhaps the biggest benefit is the level of physical fitness the training provides.

"I've never been in such good shape," Sergeant Nelson said. "Nothing compares to grappling in terms of fitness. When you get done grappling with a dude that outweighs you by 100 pounds you're totally exhausted. Running during unit PT is nothing now since I've been training."

The biggest difficulty Sergeant Nelson said she faces is finding the time to fight and train while balancing her duties as a security forces NCO. She says fights, like the recent one in Las Vegas, are usually paid out-of-pocket and she is on leave status for them. Even local fights can prove difficult if they fall during deployment or scheduled training.

"It's more likely that a fight comes up and I have three weeks' notice," she said. "If we're training or getting ready to deploy I can't fight. The Air Force comes first, but it's frustrating when it happens."

This tournament is a good example of the schedule for amateur fighters. Sergeant Nelson found out she

was selected to compete in the Tuff Girls competition. About 25 female fighters were selected a few weeks before the fight. While the chance to compete is all that was needed to get Sergeant Nelson on a plane to Las Vegas, this fight has added complications for a warrior Airman.

"If I win this fight it improves my amateur record, but after the tournament a few fighters will be selected to train in Thailand with Muay Thai masters," she said.

If selected, Sergeant Nelson would spend about 45 days training in Thailand and culminating in a fight against a Thai champion. The entire journey will be recorded as part of a reality television show.

It's an opportunity Sergeant Nelson has been looking forward to for a long time but it isn't the top thing on her mind. Her training regimen is a little more intense since she found out she has an upcoming deployment.

"It looks like the deployment won't fall on the same dates as Tuff Girls but if it does I know the decision I'll make," she said. "I'm an Air Force cop first and the reason I joined security forces is to deploy. It's an easy choice to make."

The bell sounds and round two starts out with both women rushing to the middle of the ring. Sergeant Nelson's right jab stops her foe in her tracks. Kicking her opponent around like a practice dummy, she lands kick after kick to the midsection and head, taking only a few punches during the exchange.

At minute two of the second round Sergeant Nelson unleashes a right jab, left cross, kick combination. Her coach yells out instructions to string combinations together. Conditioning is starting to play its part. After three minutes, both fighters are visibly winded, breathing with open mouths and showing less aggression. They lock up more, but Rachel's MMA skills come into play and she strikes her opponent's legs and abdomen.

"I'VE NEVER BEEN IN SUCH GOOD SHAPE, NOTHING COMPARES TO GRAPPLING IN TERMS OF FITNESS"

— Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson

The bell rings and both fighters exchange fist bumps before returning to their corners to await the judges' decision. Sergeant Nelson's corner man, Master Sgt. Sean Concepcion, a Reservist aerial porter, tells her what she did right and what she did wrong. Meanwhile, the crowd is silent with anticipation. She takes it in. Sergeant Nelson appears to be the picture of martial calm though new bruises are beginning to show among her already impressive collection.

Advancing an Air Force career and working her way up the ranks as an amateur MMA fighter is difficult, to say the least. Her fellow Airmen fighters recognize it's her drive to be the best that keeps her at the top.

"She's incredibly focused to be able to do this," Lieutenant Carter said. "Working through the amateur ranks of MMA is like trying to go pro in basketball or another major sport. There's so much competition. To be the best you have to put in long hours at the gym. When she's not doing the cop thing she's in the gym. She's going to be one of the best."

The boisterous ring announcer makes his way back to the ring to give his announcement. "In a unanimous decision, fighting out of the blue corner, Rachel…Nelson," he echoes.

In a calm manner she bows, says a few words of thanks to God in the offered microphone and leaves the ring silently as abruptly as she filled it with violence.

Hard training and dedicated focus gave Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson the upper hand. She knocked her opponent to the mat several times during the bout.

The judges awarded Sergeant Nelson the win by unanimous decision.

EARLY SEASON HURRICANE HUNTING

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON ✪ PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. JACK BRADEN

53RD WEATHER RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON CREWS GET A JUMP ON THE WORST STORMS

Cylindrical objects called dropsondes released from WC-130J Hercules aircraft helped 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron crews gather valuable meteorological information on some of the most intense recent hurricanes. A new system the Hurricane Hunters installed on all 10 WC-130Js in 2008 helped them obtain a more complete picture of the first named storm in the 2010 hurricane season.

Hurricane Alex became the strongest June hurricane since 1966 to make landfall in the United States and the first to hit the Gulf of Mexico in the season's first month since 1995. The stepped-frequency microwave radiometer, along with the dropsondes, enabled the Hurricane Hunters to show the hurricane strengthen in the final hours before landfall.

"We're getting a good picture of the surface winds of the storm," said Maj. Jeff Ragusa, aircraft commander on the Hurricane Alex mission. "That's a capability we didn't have a couple of years ago.

"The airplane is collecting a horizontal picture of the storm," the major said. "Then, we throw the dropsonde into the mix. As it falls to the surface of the water, it gives us a vertical picture of what's going on beneath the airplane. So we get a horizontal look, as well as a vertical look, to give us as much information as we can to send back to the National Hurricane Center. As the dropsonde is falling, it's sending information, two messages every second, back to the airplane."

The dropsonde is a weather instrument package released by a weather reconnaissance loadmaster into the eyewall and center of the hurricane. As a parachute, or drogue, slows the descent to the ocean, the dropsonde sends current pressure, temperature, humidity, wind speed, direction and Global

Hurricane Hunter Airmen from the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., load a WC-130J Hercules aircraft for a late-night mission into Hurricane Alex.

Positioning System information to instruments on the aircraft, said Tech. Sgt. Amy Lee, a weather reconnaissance loadmaster with the 53rd WRS. That information is then sent by satellite to the National Hurricane Center.

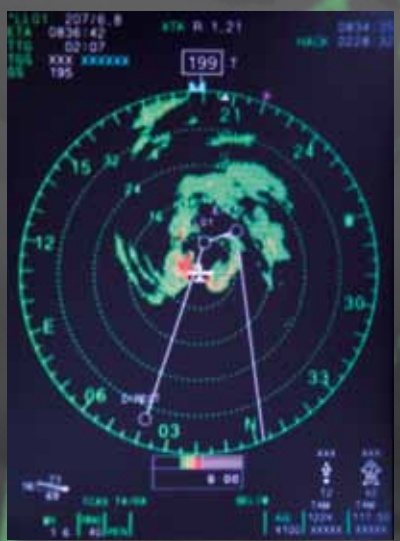
The Hurricane Hunter crew entered the eye of Hurricane Alex in the WC-130J at 5,000 feet when the storm was 130 miles off Mexico's coast. Information gathered by the dropsondes and a radiometer called the "smurf" showed wind speeds had increased to 80 mph and maximum winds were 105 mph in the northeast quadrant of the storm. They also detected the hurricane's lowest minimum pressure had dropped to 958 millibars, said Capt. Douglas Gautrau, an aerial reconnaissance weather officer. Later, the pressure dropped even further to 948 as it moved toward land. By comparison, on Aug. 13, 2004, Hurricane Charley had a low minimum pressure of 941 millibars before it slammed into southeastern Florida with 150 mph winds as a Category 4 storm. Fortunately, Hurricane Alex's winds never exceeded Category 2 strength.

The radiometer, which is located within a pod attached to the aircraft's wing, accurately measures wind speeds directly below the aircraft at the ocean's surface. Hurricane Hunter missions already improve hurricane center forecasts by 30 percent. Major Ragusa said the radiometer enhances the data the aircrew provides for hurricane forecasts. Before the radiometer was added in 2008, Hurricane Hunter crewmembers gathered wind speed information from dropsondes and observations through windows of the WC-130J. The radiometer also measures rainfall rates in a storm; flooding in Mexico and south Texas was a major concern with Hurricane Alex.

"Before, we were getting about 10 observations every hour," Captain Gautrau said. "Now, with the smurf, we're getting data every second, with 3,600 surface wind observations every hour."

The crewmembers on these flights are all Reservists with the 53rd WRS, the only military unit worldwide that flies regular hurricane reconnaissance. Sergeant Lee said she feels a sense of duty more than personal pride for the role she plays in the data the Hurricane Hunters provide to forecasters at the National Hurricane Center.

"I personally feel very sad, when a hurricane makes landfall, for the people in the path of the storm and their loss," Sergeant Lee said. "I'm really happy they were able to get out of the way in time. I'm proud just like anybody else is proud who did a job. I did my duty."



A weather station on board the WC130J Hercules gives crewmembers Hurricane Alex's conditions and their location within the storm.

As day breaks over the Gulf of Mexico, an opening in the clouds allows the Hurricane Hunter aircrew a glimpse of the water's surface.

Pilots on a WC130-J from the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron are in position to take off for a mission through Hurricane Alex.

Senior Airman Jenna Daniel loads a dropsonde for release into Hurricane Alex. Weather information transmitted by the dropsonde is evaluated for information about how the storm is changing. Airman Daniel is a weather reconnaissance loadmaster with the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss.

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

DOUBLE DUTY

THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE FAMILY WHEN BOTH PARENTS DEPLOY

Deployment preparation is important. For a family, especially when both parents are Airmen, it is even more critical. Tech. Sgt. Christina Gamez learned from her husband's previous deployments she doesn't have to plan everything on her own.

The first time her husband deployed, she wanted to do everything herself. She said her independence frustrated the friends who wanted to help. This time, Sergeant Gamez knows she needs a support network when her husband leaves. Especially since she, too, departs a few months later.

Master Sgt. Rodolfo Gamez of the Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, was scheduled to leave in July for combat skills training at Fort Polk, La., before a 365-day deployment to Afghanistan. Christina, a financial analyst in San Antonio, is to follow her husband in December for her own 365-day voluntary deployment to Afghanistan.

The couple plan to blog about their experiences so other Airmen can "know before they go." Christina said she hopes to encourage deploying Airmen to be well prepared, to look at every possible angle and to have a backup plan for everything that could possibly come up.

"I don't think I was prepared at all that first time," she said. "I didn't know how hard it was going to be. But, you can adapt. It's going to be tough and you never know what to expect. You just get through it … there are so many resources out there for you if you're just willing to accept them."

Christina said she plans to share through a blog how her family prepares before deploying and how they cope with the separation from each other and their two children, 4-year-old Tomas and 2-year-old Eva.

She says the children are accustomed to their father being away because they've experienced two of his five deployments and he often travels for work. Rodolfo is usually away 10 to 14 days each month. This time will be different. Both mom and dad will be gone for a much longer period.

Christina's parents will take the children when she deploys. In addition to completing the Air Force's deployment checklist, and having a solid family care plan, the parents continue to prepare Tomas and Eva for the transition to a year with their grandparents.

They are keeping a journal for their children to read, "so they will know what we were thinking and feeling, leading up to the deployment and while we were away from them," Christina said.

They've established goal dates so the children can mark them on a calendar and earn various rewards. They have also started gardens that each child will help tend at Grandma's house.

Once the couple found out Rodolfo was set to deploy again, Christina had her chief call to find out where she stood on the deployment roster. She learned the Air Force Personnel Center already knew her name, and she was on the short list. She would likely be tasked in the next two to three months because there were several more deployment slots coming down the pipeline. At that point the couple decided to take positive control of the situation and lessen the time the family was separated.

They decided Christina would volunteer for her own 365-day deployment to lessen the impact on the family, especially on their children. The Gamez family believes their experience shows the importance of knowing where they stand in the deployment cycle.

"The last thing we wanted was to be unaware and to get caught off guard with me deployed and then find out she has to follow shortly after," Rodolfo said. "So in the interest of being proactive, we found out she was No. 2 on the list and we had a difficult decision to make."

Rodolfo said knowing they would both deploy anyway, the two decided Christina would volunteer for a location and deployment that would minimize time away from the children and put them as near each other as their individual missions would allow.

As the departure dates draw closer, the family is spending as much time together as possible. They recently took a trip to Disney World in Orlando and are planning a return vacation to Florida the spring after the sergeants return from Afghanistan.

Rodolfo and Christina said they're confident their preparations will ensure that their children are in the best possible situation while they're away. This is just one reason why having an updated Air Force Form 357, or Family Care Certification, is important, they said.

"It's vital," Rodolfo said. "It's no different than a will because you never know when you're going to get caught in a situation. Fortunately for us, we've got a great supporting cast. Those people outlined in our family care plan are there and we've got more people volunteering to provide that support.

"Good planning meets opportunity and that's how you achieve success," he said. "I think we've done so with our family care plan, and we're well-prepared to make this transition."

Christina said she hopes her blog will help fellow Airmen make those hard choices and encourage them to follow through on their own preparations.

photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

Master Sgt. Rodolfo Gamez and his wife, Tech. Sgt. Christina Gamez, hold their children, Tomas, 4 and Ava, 3, for a portrait outside their home. The sergeants are set to deploy for year-long deployments within months of each other.

ANGEL THUNDER

PHOTOS BY
STAFF SGT. JOSHUA L. DEMOTTS

Angel Thunder 10, an Air Combat Command-sponsored exercise, at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, is the largest personnel recovery/combat search and rescue exercise to date.

An Air Force HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter with the 210th Rescue Squadron from Kulis Air National Guard Base, Alaska, flies over the desert surrounding the base during Angel Thunder 10.

The exercise combined assets from the Department of Defense, state and local response agencies and international partners for a scenario that tested search and rescue and medical evacuation capabilities.

Staff Sgt. Andrew Green, an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter flight engineer with the 55th Rescue Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., puts on his gunner's belt. The belt is part of his personal protective equipment attaching him to his aircraft.

The exercise is a joint-service, multinational, interagency effort that provides realistic personnel recovery training. Scenarios simulate deployment conditions and natural disasters in the United States and abroad.

Personnel recovery is an Air Force core function that incorporates combat search and rescue and medical evacuation.

An Air Force HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter with the 210th Rescue Squadron from Kulis Air National Guard Base, Alaska, picks up pararescuemen from the 103rd Rescue Squadron from Long Island, N.Y., and three "survivors."

An HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter with the 41st Rescue Squadron out of Moody Air Force Base, Ga., drops off two combat rescue officers and an Army Special Forces medic at a casualty collection point.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Corey Kuttie with the 38th Rescue Squadron, Moody Air Force Base, Ga., helps transport "survivors" on an HH-60G Pave Hawk from a casualty collection point in the desert near Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.

An Army Special Forces infantryman and two Brazilian commandos protect an improvised explosive device "survivor" during a scenario in Angel Thunder 10 at Playas Training and Research Center, N.M.

An Army Special Forces medic supports a "survivor" as they prepare to be transported from a casualty collection point in the Arizona desert.

Scenarios included battlefield recovery and evacuation.

Combat controllers can set up almost anywhere with radios, laptop computers and portable power sources. These Airmen coordinate air operations at austere locations and are able to call in search teams and evacuation aircraft.

Ceiling tiles in the 55th Rescue Squadron's recreation lounge feature the green footprints of past squadron members. "Green feet" is a symbol of the men in the combat search and rescue community dating to the Vietnam War.

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

MEXICO'S FORGOTTEN WARRIORS

THE AZTEC EAGLES FOUGHT WITH AMERICAN AIRMEN IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC DURING WORLD WAR II

A proud group of airmen in the South Pacific during World War II wore their Mexican pilot wings on the left breast of their uniforms and American pilot wings on the right. They called their P-47D Thunderbolt fighters "El Jarro," Spanish for "The Jug," and nicknamed themselves the "Aguilas Aztecas." While their American counterparts became part of the "Greatest Generation," Escuadron 201 became known as the Aztec Eagles – "Mexico's Forgotten Warriors."

The squadron is still the only Mexican unit to fight on foreign soil. Aztec Eagle pilots flew 795 sorties in almost 2,000 hours of combat. Seven pilots were killed, including five in 50 days of intense combat in the Pacific during the summer of 1945. But they were soon largely forgotten in their own country, even after Mexico dedicated a monument to them in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park in 1947.

Only 10 survivors remained of more than 300 Aztec Eagles when the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, opened an exhibit in their honor earlier this year. The Mexican air force exhibit is part of the "Airmen in a World at War" display in the museum's Air Power Gallery.

"It's a story not well known here or in Mexico, and we're proud to be able to tell that story," said retired Maj. Gen. Charles Metcalf, museum director, during the exhibit's opening ceremony.

The Aztec Eagles returned to fanfare in their home country that was similar to the reception American servicemembers received when the war ended. But soon, interest in their exploits faded from memory and few people knew about their accomplishments in either country, museum senior curator Terry Aitken said.

"They didn't receive the attention they probably deserved because as a squadron in the 5th Air Force, in the Southwest Pacific theater of operations, they were simply overshadowed by other events elsewhere," he said. "But I think it's well that the museum, as well as the Air Force, remembers those allies who stood and fought with us. It is especially true now, as more and more of the Air Force and our visitors have Hispanic backgrounds, that we incorporate into our exhibits these overlaps of Hispanic history into our own."

Retired Mexican air force Col. Carlos Garduno explained that when World War II began, most Mexican citizens still held considerable resentment toward their northern neighbor, mostly stemming from 19th-century conflicts that resulted in the loss of land that became part of the southwestern United States. Mexicans held a strong isolationist position and wanted no part of this foreign war.

All changed, however, in May 1942 when German U-boats torpedoed Mexican oil tankers Portero de Llano and Faja de Oro in the Gulf of Mexico.

Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho used the sinkings and the

photo courtesy National Museum of the U.S. Air Force

"We're very proud to have served with the American veterans in World War II," said Miguel Moreno Arreola, who fought with Mexican Fighter Squadron 201, the "Aztec Eagles," during the war.

Courtesy photo

Mexican air force Capt. Radames Gaxiola Andrade, third from the left, stands in front of his P-47D with his maintenance team after returning from a combat mission. Captain Andrade was assigned to the Mexican air force's Escuadrón 201. Members of the Escuadrón 201 fought alongside U.S. forces during World War II.

photo courtesy National Museum of the U.S. Air Force

Courtesy photo

Courtesy photo

Replicas of uniforms worn by Mexican air force members during World War II are part of the exhibit, "Mexican Air Force Aircrews" at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

Mexican air force Escuadrón 201 pilots stand in front of an aircraft prior to a combat mission in the Philippines. Squadron members fought alongside U.S. forces during World War II.

U.S. Air Force, Philippine army and Mexican air force members stand near a representation of Panchito Pistoles, the mascot of the Mexican squadron, painted on a wing fragment of a Japanese aircraft. The name, Panchito Pistoles, is a shortened version of the name of an animated character who starred in the Walt Disney film "The Three Caballeros."

deaths of 21 Mexican citizens, as well as worldwide aggression of the Axis powers, to convince the Mexican people to join the United States and the other Allies in the war.

"Prior to that time, there was a very poor and tenuous relationship between Mexico and the United States, as well as equally strained relationships between Mexico and Great Britain and other countries," Aitken said.

"There was no reason at all in 1941 for anyone in Mexico to harbor good feelings about the United States," he said. "Mexico was very isolationist at the time, but President Camacho didn't see this as a Mexican-U.S. issue. He went to the heart of Mexican core values: nonaggression and the protection of national and human rights. Mexico joined not only the American cause, but the greater Allied cause. He felt strongly that Mexico should not only defend its territory, but participate with other nations in the defense of their territories and against aggression."

After Mexico declared war on Germany, Italy and Japan on May 28, 1942, Camacho accepted a personal invitation from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to send his country's best fighter pilots to train and fight with American forces. George S. Messersmith, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, endorsed the proposal, and the pilots were mostly selected from the country's reserves and civilian population.

Mexican servicemembers left for Laredo, Texas, from Mexico City's Buenavista train station, with the sounds of "despedidas," or farewells, from family and friends ringing in their ears. From Laredo, they traveled by bus to Randolph Field in San Antonio and then to military bases throughout the United States for specialized training with instructor pilots from Foster Field in Victoria, Texas.

Thirty-three pilots and more than 270 support members from Squadron 201, along with a supporting headquarters element, deployed as the Mexican expeditionary air force to the Philippine Islands in February 1945. A month later, the Squadron 201 members were attached to the U.S. 5th Air Force and the 58th Fighter Group, based at Porac, Luzon, in the Philippines.

The 58th FG provided the new unit support during its first combat missions as the Aguilas Aztecas were merged into combat operations. In July, when the 58th FG deployed to the newly captured island of Okinawa, Japan, Squadron 201 members assumed responsibility for their area of operations. The airmen provided close in-ground support for the advancing U.S. Army's 25th "Tropic Lightning" Division and Philippine army units on Luzon, as well as dangerous, seven-hour long-range fighter strikes against strategic Japanese targets on the island of Formosa, now called Taiwan. During 60 missions, the squadron dropped 1,038 bombs and fired more than a million rounds of ammunition.

Representing the squadron's esprit de corps was the adoption of Panchito Pistolas as the unit mascot. The name is a shortened version of the name of the popular pistol-toting Mexican rooster character from Disney's 1944 animated film "The Three Caballeros."

After the war, Camacho presented the pilots with the "Medalla Por Servicio en el Lejano Oriente." This was a special campaign medal and the only decoration ever awarded to Mexican military members for combat outside their country's borders.

"The outstanding work made by those men demonstrated that good things can only be achieved with leadership, teamwork and sacrifice, fighting side by side and shoulder to shoulder," Lt. Col. Jose Nunez, Mexico's foreign liaison officer, said in a news article about the opening ceremony for the exhibit.

Museum visitors, from civilians to Air Force generals, consistently comment about how surprised they are to learn of the Aztec Eagles' place in World War II history, Aitken said. The exhibit includes examples of dress and flight uniforms worn by Mexican air force members during the war, a replica of the battle flag carried by the Mexican expeditionary air force, an original set of pilot wings and rank insignia.

Aitken believes the vision of Camacho and the accomplishments of the Aztec Eagles extend far beyond their impact on battles in the Pacific.

"I certainly appreciate what the Aztec Eagles did during World War II, but what impressed me the most was the very long-lasting legacy between our two countries and the relationships we've had with Latin American countries," Aitken said. "It's impressive to me that over a century of bad relations was turned around by some very inspired leadership by Presidents Camacho and Roosevelt. We still have disagreements, but to this day, there remains a strong degree of mutual respect."

Members of the small Mexican fighter squadron who wore the pilot wings of both countries helped set a precedent of cooperation with other nations, including their northern neighbors.

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON ✪ PHOTOS BY LANCE CHEUNG

TAKING THE PUNCH

If Airman magazine were a reality TV show, the view behind the set would show the Airman team brainstorming ideas for the next social media post. Things always sound better in the planning stages of these unofficial sessions. Ideas like "let's eat whale blubber" or "let's get zapped by the laser" sound like legitimate crowd pleasers. Then there's the time I thought it would be funny to film me getting punched by a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Things don't always turn out the way we expect, because even female MMA fighters don't hit like girls.

Our team was sent to cover Airmen training to be MMA fighters in Rapid City, S.D. We covered two fighters, Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson and 1st Lt. Jason Carter. We visited their dojo to see them train and that's when we got the idea for one of us to get beat up. It was my turn to be on the Web.

I'm not a fighter. I don't know how to make another man submit with a rear naked chokehold. I do know that when you have the choice of taking a punch from a 115-pound woman or a 215-pound man, you do the math and take the punch from the woman. I was wrong.

My interviews with the fighters should have tipped me off. When I asked Sergeant Nelson why she wanted to be a fighter and why she chose to be a cop, she said she just wanted to hurt people. What I thought was bravado was actually her honest answer. This woman has a fighter inside that wanted to get into the ring and make people hurt.

Lieutenant Carter, on the other hand, was a little different. He still wanted to win and he trains hard for it. But for him, MMA is a challenge, a way of testing his strength, a hobby. He doesn't want to go pro whereas Sergeant Nelson dreams about it.

At the dojo, during the planning phase of "operation get punched in the head," I quickly eliminated the huge dude in favor of the petite woman. Mistake number one.

The plan was for me to do an intro for the camera and then take a hit. I explained it to Sergeant Nelson before we started.

"When we're on assignment, we try to find ways of plugging the story for social media," I said.

"OK."

"So, for this one, I'm going to need you to punch me in the face," I said. Mistake number two.

"Oh, heck yeah," she said with a little too much enthusiasm.

"This is just for the video," I said. "You don't have to hit me as hard as you can. Just enough to look real."

"Whatever," was the reply.

How do I explain what it was like to get hit by Sergeant Nelson? The strike was a lot like the fighter: small, compact, the equivalent of replacing a tennis racket with a hammer. And it hurt. It hurt a lot. It made the edges of my vision go dark and come back in time to catch a punch in the stomach. I didn't know MMA fighters train to do combinations almost constantly. Mistake number three.

Now, it's been said that I took the punch poorly because my momma wasn't hard enough on me or because I wrote poetry in high school. The truth is, Sergeant Nelson is a well-trained MMA fighter and I'm a writer. I never had a chance.

That's the best part about writing for Airman magazine. I get to meet Airmen who are doing so much more in and out of uniform. They're fighters, artists or students studying to be doctors. If there's one thing I've learned during my time at the magazine, it's that Airmen throughout the total force have amazing stories to tell.

Another thing I've learned is not to take a punch from an MMA fighter who clearly doesn't know the meaning of taking it easy.

photo by Lance Cheung

Staff Sgts. Rachel Nelson and J. Paul Croxon inside a step-van prior to an outdoor environmental portrait at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.

Staff Sgt. J. Paul Croxon uses his phone to take a snapshot of 1st Lt. Jason Carter, blue gloves, a readiness flight commander and mixed-martial arts fighter, at Dynamic Martial Arts in Rapid City, S.D. The photo was posted on Airman magazine social media sites.

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

SEPTEMBER 2010

LT. REYNALDO PEREZ GALLARDO, PILOT OF THE MEXICAN AIR FORCE THAT FLEW COMBAT MISSIONS AS PART OF THE UNITED STATES 5TH AIR FORCE IN THE PACIFIC THEATER IN 1945, SITS ON HIS P-47 THUNDERBOLT AIRCRAFT AFTER A SORTIE.

design by Nick Medrano

Airman

THE FINAL FRAME

THEIR FUTURE'S SO BRIGHT | *U.S. Air Force photo by* STAFF SGT. CHRISTOPHER BOITZ

CREWMEMBERS ASSIGNED TO THE 96TH BOMB SQUADRON AT BARKSDALE AIR FORCE BASE, LA., FLY A RED FLAG-ALASKA MISSION IN A B-52H STRATOFORTRESS OVER EIELSON AFB, ALASKA.