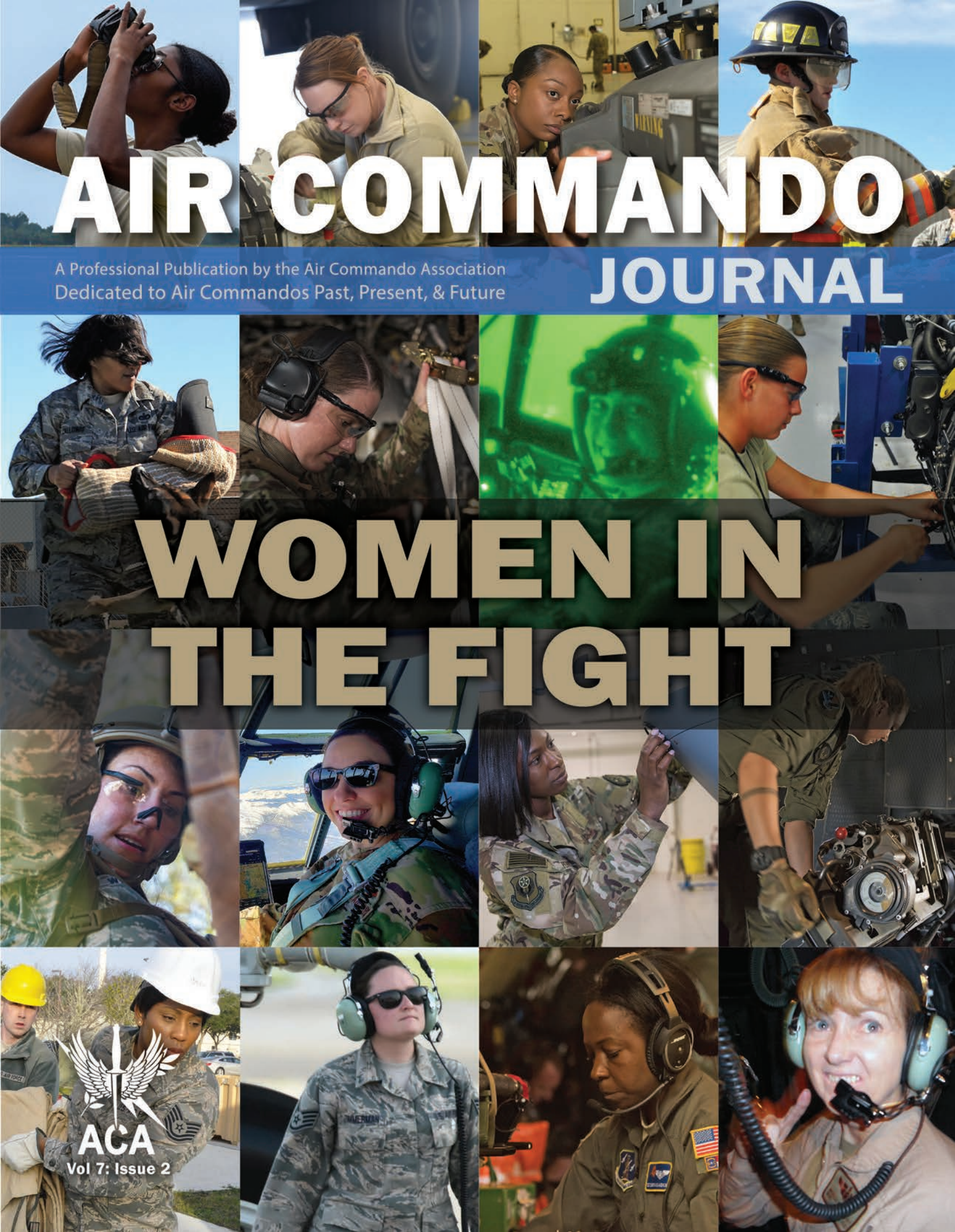
AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present, & Future

WOMEN IN THE FIGHT



ACA

Vol 7: Issue 2

ACA Corporate Partners

Assisting ACA in our mission to support Air Commandos and their families: Past, Present, and Future

PLATINUM

ARMA
Bell Helicopter
Boeing
CACI
Elbit Systems
Geico
Intellisense Systems
Lockheed Martin
Orbital ATK
Principal Deloitte Consulting, LLP
Ultra Electronics ICE

GOLD

Arby's
L-3 Mission Integration
Leonardo DRS
Sierra Nevada Group
VATC

SILVER

CAE USA
Creative Awards & Framing
The Hoplite Group
MacAulay-Brown, Inc.
Rally Point Management
SoCoSIX Strategies
VectorCSP

BRONZE

Beam, McLaughlin & Associates
Booz Allen Hamilton
GE Aviation
General Atomics Aeronautical
Quantitech
Rockwell Collins
Rolls-Royce North America
Trident University

SPIRIT

Blue Water Escape
Eglin Federal Credit Union
Emerald Coast Convention Center
Esterline Defense Technologies
Southeastern Landscaping
WinTec Arrowmaker, Inc.

Air Commando JOURNAL

Publisher
Michael Wooley / Email: info@aircommando.org

Editor in Chief
Dennis Barnett / Email: info@aircommando.org

Senior Editor
Rick Newton

Research Editor
Paul Harmon

Book Review Editor
Scott McIntosh / Email: bookrevieweditor@aircommando.org

Contributing Editors
Michael McKinney
Dan Settergren
Darrel Whitcomb

Public Affairs/Marketing Director
Melissa Gross / Email: melissa@aircommando.org

Graphic Designer
Jeanette Elliott / Email: jeanette@aircommando.org

Air Commando Association Board of Directors

Chairman of the Board :
Michael Wooley, Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)

President:
Dennis Barnett, Col, USAF (Ret)

Vice President:
Wayne Norrad, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

Treasurer:
James Connors, Col, USAF (Ret)

Executive Directors:
Norman Brozenick Jr., Maj Gen, USAF (Ret)
Clay McCutchan, Maj Gen, USAF (Ret)
William Turner, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

Directors:
Tom Bradley, Col, USAF (Ret)
Heather Bueter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)
Chris Foltz, Lt Col, USAF
Hollis Tompkins, SMSgt, USAF (Ret)
Micheal Wright, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

Air Commando Association
P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569
Telephone: (850) 581-0099
Fax: (850) 581-8988

Web Site: www.aircommando.org Email: info@aircommando.org

This publication is for the information, interest, and enjoyment of our readers. Views and opinions expressed are of the author or source of material and do not necessarily reflect opinions, views, or endorsements of the ACA. Material in the *Air Commando Journal* may be reproduced provided the source is credited. *Air Commando Journal* is not sponsored by DOD, USAF, or AFSOC.
ACA does not endorse any particular candidate or political action group. Individual members are asked to restrain from inferring or stating any such association of the ACA in their dealings with these type groups.

Air Commando Journal
October 2018
Vol. 7, Issue 2

4
Foreword: *Brenda Cartier, Brig Gen (Sel), USAF*

8
Spectre EWO: Tracy Onufer

14
Tactical Communications: Anna Garcia-Lucas

18
Maintenance Leader: Heather Bueter

24
One Woman's Journey to Becoming An Air Commando: Allison Black

27
Air Force Reserves - Air Commando: Jackie Powell

ON THE COVER

Air Force Special Operations Command opened combat aircrew positions to women in 1993, but women have served in the Air Force in critical support roles for decades. This issue of the *Air Commando Journal* recognizes and honors their service and sacrifice as Airmen, as teammates, and as Air Commandos.

35
Gunship Sisterhood: Meghan Ripple

5
Chindit Chatter

6
Hotwash

32
Maintenance Officer: Rachel Halvorson

40
The Road Less Traveled: Kate Hewlett

44
Air Commando - It's A Culture: Kristina Montgomery

48
Remembering Anissa Shero: Air Commando

50
Book Reviews

FOREWORD

In 1993 Congress repealed the ban on women serving in combat aircraft. Shortly thereafter Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) led the way integrating women into all fixed wing aircrew positions. Yet, nearly a quarter of a century later, the story of AFSOC's female Air Commandos has never been told in a cohesive, comprehensive manner that captures our vast combat experience, leadership, and significant impact on Air Commando history. This volume is an opportunity for the women of AFSOC to share a glimpse into the lives of your wives, mothers, friends, and neighbors who are proud to call themselves Air Commandos past and present.

Twenty-plus years ago when I heard the news that AFSOC was hiring, I was a junior captain at the decision point of whether or not to stay in the Air Force when my active duty service commitment expired. I thought, "This sounds like my dream job." I made a phone call to the squadron commander of the 16th Special Operations Squadron, then Lt Col Brad Heithold , who told me, "Brenda, we're happy to hire you into Spectre gunships, but if you want an assignment quickly give the 4th SOS a call. They're a new airframe and trying to fill a lot of crew positions." On his advice, I called the 4th Special Operations Squadron and spoke with Lt Col Eric Fiel who asked when I could start. Soon thereafter my orders arrived, and I checked into the 19th Special Operations Squadron for AC-130U Spooky Gunship training in September 1997.

I don't remember exactly how many female aircrew there were when I arrived at Hurlburt Field in the late '90s, but I do recall there were fewer than a dozen or so that I knew of across all AFSOC aircraft. One of those was the first female AFSOC pilot, 2Lt Shelley Ripple (now Col Shelley Rodriguez). Col Rodriguez is an MC-130P/J Shadow pilot who has gone on to have a distinguished career. She recently led Air Commandos as the Operations Group Commander at the 58th Special Operations Wing. Currently she is serving at AFSOC Headquarters developing the future of AFSOC weapons systems, making Air Commandos more ready and lethal.

A couple years after my arrival I was joined in gunships by Lieutenants Tracy Onufer and Meghan English (now Col Tracy Onufer and Lt Col Meghan Ripple), both Air Commandos who share their stories in these pages. There were many more to come, both officer and enlisted, serving as aircrew, maintainers, and combat support, Air Commandos including Allison Black, Heather Bueter, Kristina Montgomery, Rachel Halvorson, Kate Hewlett, Jackie Powell, and Anna Garcia-Lucas. I am grateful to these women for sharing their stories in this edition and personifying hundreds of female Air Commandos past, present, and future.

Nevertheless, in spite of two-plus decades of women serving as Air Commandos, I still run into people who don't realize or believe women serve in special operations. There are those who, despite our successes—including being awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses, hundreds of Air Medals, and dozens of Air Force Combat Action Medals— still doubt that when faced with the immense challenges of combat we can overcome obstacles and emerge successfully alongside our brothers in arms.

The truth is today we have women serving with distinction in all crew positions and combat support roles. The Air Commandos in these pages represent some of our nation's top talent, contributing diversity of thought, perspectives, and skills to AFSOC. We have fought in every combat contingency since Operation ALLIED FORCE (1999). We are patriots who have a deep desire to serve our nation, defend our Constitution and support our allies at all costs. Some have paid the ultimate sacrifice, including women such as SSgt Anissa Shero.

We've turned to each other along the way, both deployed and at home, forming bonds of friendship and family. We've also enjoyed tremendous support from many of our male counterparts and leadership who have trained with us, deployed in combat with us, and developed us into AFSOC leaders. Across our joint SOF world, many of us have a story of being 'by name requested' by a SEAL or Special Forces team going to the 'X' to be the crewmembers of choice on particularly tough missions.

While these pages highlight our history and our Air Commando experience today, this edition is also a call to the future. The next generation of girls and boys who want to be Air Commandos is out there. We want them to know the hangar doors are wide open for them to join the proud women and men of Air Force Special Operations Command.

My thanks to the Air Commando Association for the opportunity to be a part of this edition, and a very special thanks to Col (Ret) Dennis Barnett for giving me the great honor of penning this Foreword and ensuring that we capture the rich history of all Air Commandos, anywhere, anytime, any place.

Brenda Cartier, Brig Gen (Sel), USAF
AFSOC Director of Operations

Brig Gen (Sel) Cartier has been an Air Commando for over two decades, she qualified as a Nav/FCO/CSO in the AC-130U, U-28, and MC-130J. She formerly commanded the 4th SOS, the 1st ESOG (AFG), and most recently the 58th SOW. She has flown combat missions in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

CHINDIT CHATTER

Women have played a vital role in AFSOC since its inception in 1987. However, it was not until April 1993 that AFSOC opened the AC-130 and HC/MC-130 Combat Shadows and Combat Talons to women. In late 1993 the first two women to start training for a role in AFSOC weapon systems as crewmembers were SrA Christine Kelley and SrA Lisa Wilson at Little Rock AFB. Their follow-on was as loadmasters on the AC-130H. 25 years later, women have truly made their mark during countless hours in combat in nearly every AFSOC weapon system and in support roles across the entire spectrum. AFSOC leadership has recognized these contributions and have selected women for every level of command and Senior NCO leadership positions. We are proud to have AFSOC's first female flag officer, Brig Gen (Sel) Brenda Cartier introduce this historic edition of the *Air Commando Journal* in the foreword. We are also proud that we are the first publication dedicated to telling these courageous women's stories across the command. I think our readers will enjoy learning of the many roles that they have fulfilled.

There is another significant event that I need to highlight: the recent posthumous award of the Medal of Honor to then TSgt John Chapman. Air Commandos and airmen across the entire Air Force are extremely proud that his is the first awarded to an Airman for service above and beyond since Viet Nam. Your Air Commando Association is assisting in the celebration of this feat as we take this edition to print. Lt Gen Webb, the AFSOC Commander, has entrusted ACA to plan and host the culminating event which will be a banquet attended by innumerable dignitaries. The primary event of that evening will be the induction of TSgt Chapman into the Air Commando Hall of Fame. We are thrilled for this opportunity and will do all Air Commandos and the Chapman family proud. We will further highlight TSgt Chapman in Volume 7 Issue 3 of the Journal which will feature not only TSgt Chapman's induction, but also the five new inductees that will be inducted during our convention in December. Those great Americans are recognized in another part of this edition.

All in all, this is an exciting time to be an Air Commando. The focus of this edition of the *ACJ* highlighting "Women in the Fight" is long overdue. Be proud Air Commandos….be very proud of them. Be proud of TSgt Chapman and the Chapman family, and all that Air Commandos have accomplished. Enjoy this edition of your *Air Commando Journal*.

Any Time - Any Place

Dennis Barnett, Col, USAF (Ret)
ACA President and Editor In Chief

Lithograph "Assault on Koh Tang" created by Mr Ronald Wong

"Assault on Koh Tang" Lithograph

Mr Wong,

I am the research editor for the Air Commando Association's magazine, The *Air Commando Journal*. The theme of the coming issue is the "Mayaguez Incident" and we are requesting permission to use your lithograph "Assault on Koh Tang" in the proposed layout. The *Air Commando Journal* (ACJ) is a professional publication by the Air Commando Association and is dedicated to Air Commandos past, present, and future.

We would like to use your lithograph twice. Once as the background for the cover and a second time as a two-page spread for the article "Mayaguez Memories" by Maj Gen (Ret) Rich Comer. General Comer was a 2Lt copilot at the time and flew on Jolly 12 for the operation. We, on the *Air Commando Journal* staff, believe your "Assault on Koh Tang" captures the gravity and chaos of the situation as well as the tenacity and courage of all the Airmen and Marines who participated in that historical event. The artwork will be identified as yours in both uses. We humbly request your permission to use the lithograph.

On a personal note, you and I met back in the late 1990's when I was the operations officer and later commander of the 21st Special Operations Squadron. Over the years I have seen your work in many an office from all different aircraft communities. My copy of "Assault on Koh Tang" was used for the ACJ and now is prominently displayed in the ACA headquarter's building. Recently, a copy of your "Devil's Chariot," one with pencil remarque of a Pave Low gunner, was auctioned online for charity and brought in a $1,000 donation to the Air Commando Foundation. It is easy to say that your artwork has a dedicated following across the entire Air Commando community.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Paul Harmon, Col, USAF (Ret) "Knife 01"
Life Member #L2060

Paul,

Good to hear from you again after all these years. And thank you for the news about your publication. Please proceed to use the print image as planned, with my best wishes.

All the best,
Ron Wong

Mayaguez Issue

Another great edition of ACJ regarding the Mayaguez Recovery and Koh Tang battle. I would like to add that the HC-130 "King" aircraft and crews were absolutely critical to salvaging this entire operation and preventing even worse loss of aircraft and lives. They kept flyable HH-53Cs on station, nursed leaking and battle damaged aircraft to safety, permitted HH-53s to carry larger non-fuel payloads and assisted battle-damaged Jolly Green 43 (escorted by JG 1-1) in locating and recovering aboard the fast-closing USS Coral Sea. Prior to this diversion to the ship, the King tried valiantly twice to aerial refuel an engine-out Jolly Green 43 that could only make 95 KIAS. Both times the King began to stall and barely powered out above the ocean with prop wake observed on the sea surface. Also, when earlier responding to a critical fuel condition and refueling Jolly Green 1-1, both the King and Jolly noted that we were being fired upon by a Khmer Rouge PBR. The refueling calmly continued while relocating further from the pursuing craft. Bottom line is that the HC-130s and their gallant crews are owed an enormous debt of gratitude and appreciation. I respectfully submit that their legacy manifesting itself in the MC-130P and MC-130E/H/J penetrating tanker communities also underscores their role and contributions towards "form(ing) the nucleus of what became Air Force Special Operations Command."

All the Best,
Gary Weikel, Col, USAF (Ret)
Former 20th SOS Commander
ACA Life Member #3016

Mayaguez Incident

Dear Editor-in-Chief,

Some of my former Combat Control Team (CCT) members may ask why Combat Controllers were not mentioned in the last ACA Journal's article about the evacuation of Saigon, Operation Frequent Wind. Four CCT members from Detachment 6, 6th Aerial Port Squadron, Clark Air Base, Philippines, were heroically involved in the evacuation mission and each were awarded the Silver Star Medal. Basically, the team was assigned to the Military Airlift Command and therefore not considered "special ops" or Air Commandos at that time. So, their heroic actions in 1975 were

not recognized in the *Air Commando Journal*. But, since all CCT members are now considered Air Commandos, I'd like to mention them here.

MSgt Louis O. Brabham, Jr. , SSgt James D. "JD" Burch , SSgt Guy T. "Tom"Fagan , Sgt John E. Lebold

They lived up to the old CCT motto. "First In - Last Out"

Wayne G. Norrad, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)
Vice President, ACA
Navarre, FL

Air Force H-53s of the 21st SOS and the 40th ARRS landing aboard USS Midway, 20 April 1975. (Photo courtesy of *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang Island*.)

Dear Chief Norrad,

Please be assured that there was no intent to minimize the contributions of the combat controllers during Operation FREQUENT WIND (OFW). When the writing team was researching the article they focused on Phase II, the rotary wing evacuation, because these were the same special operations and combat rescue squadrons that would also participate in the Mayaguez Incident. Upon going back to review the sources used to craft the OFW article, there is no mention of CCTs during the helicopter evacuation.

Obviously, what the CCTs contributed during OFW is a relatively unknown story and sounds like one that needs to be told. If any veterans from Det 6 would like to share that history, we have editors ready and willing to help.

Air Commando Journal
Editorial Staff

Air Commando Foundation

Dear Air Commando's,

My heartfelt thanks to your organization [Air Commando Foundation] for your generous support during such a challenging time of my life. Ensuring that my mother-in-law could be here to take care of our daughter while I recovered from surgery relieved so much stress. Our family is forever grateful. Thank you so much.

MSgt (name withheld for privacy)
Cancer Survivor

Foundation Support

Thank you for your kindness to our family during this very difficult time. The financial contribution you made to help us is very humbling. We appreciate it and each of you for what you do for others.

Sincerely,
Leah, Samantha, Lane, and Josie Trim

Spectre Patch

Jeanette, you put out a super fantastic Journal on the Mayaguez. Thank you for all you do. My daughter found this old patch in some of my old stuff. Thought it might be of interest.

Bill Castlen
Life Member #L220
Dothan, AL

Bill,
Thank you for the kind words, the Air Commando Journal is lucky to have a wonderful group of dedicated volunteer editors and contributing authors such as yourself. We could not publish this magazine without everyone's time and talents! Your patch is sure to bring back memories for many of our readers, thank you for sending us the photo.

V/R
Jeanette Elliott
Media Coordinator

Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. Thank you in advance for your interest in the *Air Commando Journal*.

Advertisers in this issue:

Air Commando Association.....back cover
Air Commando Foundation..... 12
CAE 37
Creative Awards..... 16
Emerald Coast Convention Center..... 16
Newman University 13
Rolls Royce 31
Scott Photo Works..... 16
Special Operations Warrior Foundation..... 19
SSAI..... 21
TSC Productions..... 16
VectorCSP 17
ZTMotors..... 34

(Then) Lt Col Onufer poses with the 105mm gun as part of Cannon AFB's Women's History Month in March 2011. (Photo courtesy of 27 SOW Public Affairs.)

SPECTRE EWO

By Tracy Onufer, Col, USAF

I always chuckle when people ask me how I ended up in the Air Force because it was really quite random. I was born on the now-closed Wurtsmith AFB in Michigan, but that was the extent of my Air Force interaction. My dad separated after his first tour and we moved to Lansing, MI, where I attended one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. I had an affinity for math and science in school, so my dad persuaded me to consider studying engineering. I also enjoyed chemistry and noticed that chemical engineers had the highest average starting salary for all career fields. Sold! I applied to one college and got accepted, so in the fall of 1991 I headed down the road to Ann Arbor, MI, to study chemical engineering (ChemE) at the University of Michigan.

Unfortunately, I quickly realized that I didn't particularly care for the ChemE curriculum. I slogged through my courses because the other students kept saying, "It'll get better senior year. That's when it all comes together." I stuck it out, got to senior year, yet the lightbulb never illuminated. I still didn't like it. But it was too late to turn back or to change majors. I finished my degree in late summer 1995 and did not have a job lined up. I apathetically mailed out resumes—it was the mid-1990s and the internet was still in its infancy, and I signed up for interviews at the School of Engineering's Placement Center.

In September 1995, an Air Force recruiter came to the Placement Center. I figured, "It can't hurt to meet with him. He'll probably offer me some type of engineering job." So, I signed up for an interview. But instead of offering me an engineering job, he said I had a good chance at a flying position because of my technical background. I'm pretty sure my jaw dropped to the floor, exhibiting just how ignorant of the Air Force I was. I had no idea I would be eligible to fly as a career. I took the plunge and started signing paperwork.

I started Officer Training School nine months later, in June 1996, and Undergraduate Navigator Training (UNT) in February 1997. I had pretty simple aspirations – I just wanted to be a "panel nav" and visit as many destinations as possible. Unfortunately, there were four other students in my primary phase of UNT who wanted to do the same thing and we only got one airlift aircraft in the "drop" (list of aircraft to choose from), which I did not get. I had no desire to be a fighter or bomber weapon systems officer (WSO), so I leaned toward electronic warfare officer (EWO). The list of planes with EWOs is quite small and the only ones that appealed to me were the C-130 variants – AC-130, MC-130, and EC-130. Upon completing the intermediate phase of UNT, our drop included two EWO and two WSO slots. I finished first of the group and chose EWO, even though the plane was still unknown. As luck would have it, though, the EWO choices were both AC-130s – one U-model and one H-model. I chose the AC-130U.

In May 1998, I both earned my navigator wings and moved down the road to Hurlburt Field, and in July, started mission qualification training at the 19th SOS. We womenfolk flyers were still pretty newfangled then, and the only other female aircrew member in the 4th SOS at that time was then-Capt Brenda Cartier. During both nav school and mission qualification I don't recall sensing any active hostility to my presence, but I did feel there were extra layers of scrutiny and an underlying expectation that I was going to fail. It seemed that I had to work twice as hard to earn the respect that was automatically afforded to the men. But I didn't let that faze me. I kept my proverbial nose to the grindstone and earned my 4th SOS patch in mid-October.

In November, I went on a TDY that included a brief stop at the Air Force Academy to do a meet-and-greet with one of the cadet squadrons. Our Chief Enlisted Manager, CMSgt "Bo" Ano, joined us for this portion and I will never forget his comments to one of the female cadets who asked about opportunities in AFSOC and how women were viewed in the flying squadrons. Chief Ano candidly admitted that he was initially against the integration of women on AFSOC aircraft. But as we trickled into the squadrons he realized we could do the job just as competently as the men, and that he'd fly with us anytime, anywhere. As a young 1Lt, it was extremely heartening to hear these words from a 20-something-year Chief and gunner.

Unfortunately, those good feelings didn't last very long. In January 1999, my world turned upside down. I had just come back from a TDY and was four days out from my first deployment to support operations in Kosovo, when the squadron's section commander said he needed to see me. He had the unpleasant task of notifying me that "unfavorable" information had come up during my background investigation for a Top Secret (TS) clearance, and that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) would make a determination on revoking my clearance. He had to suspend my access to classified information during the investigation. Long story short, I had tried marijuana a handful of times while in college. During that initial meeting with the recruiter as he asked questions to fill out the application paperwork he said, "And you've never done drugs?" I replied, "I wouldn't say never. I've tried pot a few times." He essentially dismissed my admission by saying, "Aw, experimenting with drugs is the same as not doing them at all," and marked "No" to the question on the application form. Again, being very ignorant of the military, I went along with it because I had no reason to not trust him. I had no idea there was a drug waiver I could have applied for, or the future ramifications that would ensue from that one little checkmark.

Over the next few weeks I learned that my previous drug use was discovered through medical paperwork, as I had told

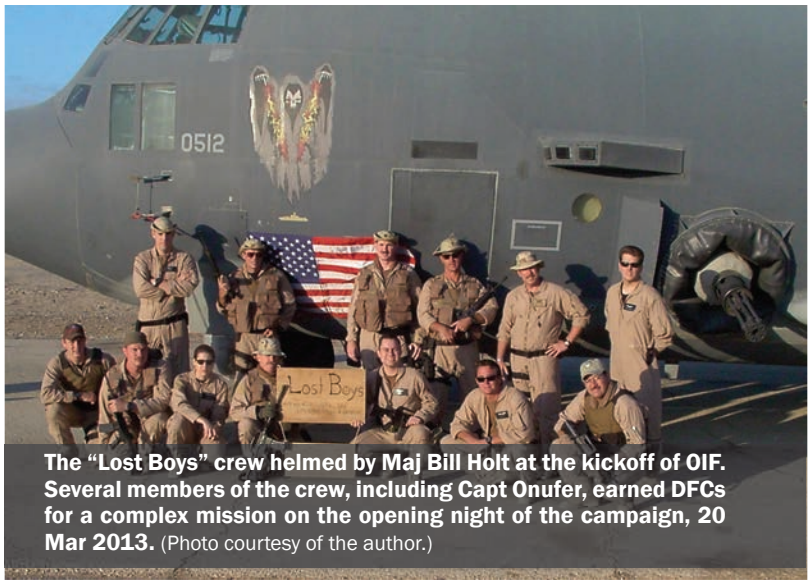
a doctor in college that I had tried marijuana. I explained the situation to the 4th SOS commander, then-Lt Col Eric Fiel, and he supported me. He lobbied the wing commander to get a letter signed recommending against revocation and issued me a Letter of Reprimand (LOR) for lying on official paperwork. His tactic was two-fold: show that I had already received punishment for my offense, and that I had the support of the chain of command to keep my clearance. However, OPM was unmoved. In May they issued a letter of intent to revoke my clearance but would allow me to appeal.

During the investigation I contacted my US senator from Michigan to open an investigation to try and prove that I told the recruiter I had used drugs. No surprise, the Congressional investigation could not substantiate my claims because the recruiter did not admit to falsifying my application paperwork. It was the classic "he said/she said" scenario. After a final chance to appeal in person in the fall, my clearance was ultimately revoked in November 1999.

While all of this was going on I earned my keep in the 4th SOS by working in the scheduling office, and then moved to the training office. If nothing else I provided continuity and enabled more opportunities for the other crewmembers in those shops to fly. However, as Kosovo continued it became apparent that I was a liability to the squadron because I couldn't hear or talk about classified operations. A deal was made and I became "with duties at" the 16th Services Squadron (SVS), working in their Resource Management Flight. I managed and oversaw the private organizations (POs) on base, mostly consisting of unit booster clubs. During this time I also inquired about my options as it's hard to be of value to the military without a security clearance. I was essentially told that not having a clearance didn't matter – I had more than four years left on my active duty service commitment (ADSC) and the needs of the Air Force dictated that I stay in.

To say that I was at a low point in my life is an understatement. I wasn't trustworthy enough to hold a clearance, but I had a pulse and could do office work to fulfill my ADSC. My demeanor became so gloomy that a friend's boyfriend nicknamed me "Black Cloud." After several weeks of wallowing, I finally sucked it up and went to see the flight doc. He listened patiently to my sob story (literally) and suggested I try a course of anti-depressants. I took him up on the offer and it's one of the best things I've done for my mental well-being. Within about a month the gloom started to fade

(Then) Col Stephen Clark of the 4SOS and (then) Capt Onufer at a Spectre event. (Photo courtesy of the author.)



The "Lost Boys" crew helmed by Maj Bill Holt at the kickoff of OIF. Several members of the crew, including Capt Onufer, earned DFCs for a complex mission on the opening night of the campaign, 20 Mar 2013. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

(Then) Maj Meghan Ripple and Tracey Onufer (Photo courtesy of the author.)

Maj Onufer and crew members aboard her plane. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

and I started to feel like myself again. I threw myself into my SVS job – I fixed a lot of deficiencies with the PO program and ensured the base's POs were operating within regulations and guidelines. It was far from the most glorious of duties, but it was mine and I owned it. I made some great friends along the way, and more importantly, truly learned the value of hard work. Like the old saying goes, it's how you act in the face of adversity that truly defines who you are. I may have started off in the fetal position but I picked myself up, put my "big girl pants" on, and made the best of the opportunity I had to continue serving the Air Force.

During my inquiries about my options I learned that I could reapply for a security clearance at the 1-year point after the revocation. I did just that in November 2000. It was far from a speedy process. In July 2001 I returned to the 4th SOS to work for the commander, then-Lt Col "Hart" Franklin, as one of his execs. I still didn't have a clearance, but he trusted that I could do the job without any security compromises.

I had just pulled into the squadron parking lot on 9/11 and listened in disbelief as the radio DJ said an airplane had flown into one of the twin towers. When I went inside most of the squadron were gathered around the ops desk watching the horror unfold on TV. Shortly thereafter, about 75% of the squadron deployed in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), while the secretary and I kept the front office running. On the morning of 6 Dec 2001, I received a phone call from a security forces member. I don't remember his name, but he delivered the news I was waiting to hear – my clearance had been reinstated! And not just to Secret, but TS and eligible for access to Sensitive Compartmented Information. I received the official letter from OPM later that week with the same words, and a request to destroy everything having to do with my case. Uh, no way dude. That was almost 3 years of my professional flying career taken away from me. I'm keeping that documentation for as long as I hold a security clearance, and probably until long after I've retired from the Air Force.

So why did I spend the majority of this article detailing my clearance revocation? Simple – it shaped who I became as an officer. Had the revocation not happened, I'm pretty sure I would've been a middle-of-the-pack officer and I doubt I would have made the Air Force a career. The ordeal taught me that it's possible to recover from an egregious mistake with the right leadership and the right attitude. For the former, I'm very thankful I was in AFSOC. I don't know that another MAJCOM would have found me redeemable or been willing to put the effort into salvaging my nascent career. For the latter, I became determined to thank those who supported me by making the best of the second chance I was offered. Ultimately, I refused to let the revocation define me as a person or an officer. It happened, I learned a LOT of hard lessons, and I moved on.

With my newly reinstated clearance, I was off to the races. I re-accomplished mission qualification training in April 2002 and several deployments followed thereafter supporting both OEF and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). Between May 2002 and June 2008, I deployed eight times: one crew and one staff deployment in OEF, and five crew and one staff deployment in OIF. During this time, I also did several jobs both in and out of the 4th SOS: plans officer, flight commander, chief EWO, standardization & evaluation, and assistant operations officer in the 4th; chief of group current ops in the 16th Operations Support Squadron; and executive officer in HQ AFSOC's Directorate of Operations (A3). I also made major and was selected to attend the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). I finally left Hurlburt Field in late June 2008, capping a 10-year and 1-month run there.

Although the three years without a security clearance were hard and demoralizing, I enjoyed amazing support from several key officers at Hurlburt Field both during the revocation and after the reinstatement. Lt Gen (Ret) Eric Fiel not only supported me at the beginning of the ordeal, he was the officer who brought me up to HQ AFSOC to serve as the A3 exec. Col (Ret) Hart Franklin wrote a support letter on my behalf during the initial investigation and believed in me enough to let me return to the

Capt Onufer hoisting a 105 mm round several weeks prior to the start of OIF. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

4th SOS without a security clearance. Maj Gen (Ret) Stephen Clark appointed me as one of his flight commanders in the 4th SOS and showed me what true mentorship is in the Air Force. I absolutely would not be where I am today without the efforts, support, and trust that these officers afforded me. I also have to give thanks to Brig Gen Brenda Cartier, who paved the way for all the female aircrew who came to the 4th SOS.

The rest of my career thus far has been phenomenal. NPS was fantastic and I thoroughly enjoyed sharing experiences with sister Service and international special operations forces (SOF). Following NPS, then-Col Clark brought me to Cannon AFB to be his Chief of Safety, with an intended follow-on to be the operations officer at the 16th SOS. This did happen, but on an accelerated pace. Instead of serving as the Chief of Safety for 12 – 18 months, I was there for 2.5 months. The 16th

SOS' operations officer was pulled early to take command of another squadron and I was appointed the new 16th SOS/DO in mid-March 2010. I had the privilege of serving under then-Lt Col "Dutch" Miller and with outstanding officers and enlisted members. Growing up in the monstrous 4th SOS, the 16th was much more manageable with its 166 authorized personnel. Plus, being at Cannon was like being on a remote assignment, so the bonds and ties in the unit were much stronger. The squadron truly felt like a family.

US Air Force Col Bill West, 27th Special Operations Group commander, (then) Lt Col Tracy Onufer, 16th Special Operations Squadron relinquishing commander, and Lt Col James Mott, 16th SOS commander, stand as they commence the 16 SOS change of command ceremony at Cannon AFB, NM, 9 Nov 2012. (Photo by USAF Senior Airman Jette Carr)

In February 2011, I became the 39th commander of the 16th SOS, and the first female commander in the unit's storied history. Or, as the execs liked to refer to me, "Spectre Mom." I always joked, "Why do I need kids of my own when I already have 165 of them?" It was a wild ride and one that I was very honored and happy to be on. I had the opportunity to pay forward what I learned from my mentors and actively sought to mentor and empower members of the squadron. I truly hope that my time in the 16th SOS is remembered more for fostering an environment of personal and professional growth and less for being the first female commander. Although I've been out of command for over five years, I burst with pride when I hear from former squadron members who drop me a quick text or message telling me about their accomplishments or asking for advice. Nothing is as satisfying as knowing that you helped shaped the future of the Air Force and celebrating small, large, or somewhere-in-between victories with the people you have had an influence upon.

As I start the next chapter of my Air Force journey, I look forward to the day that people do not bat an eye when females are appointed to leadership positions in AFSOC or elsewhere in the SOF enterprise. I'm thrilled for the women who have the opportunity to join the Battlefield Airmen training pipeline and acknowledge that they have a tough road ahead of them. For those who succeed, they will set the example and tone for their male counterparts. It won't be easy for them and they'll likely have to endure added scrutiny and perhaps even open hostility. But eventually, their service will become the norm, just as it is now the norm to have females well represented on AFSOC aircraft. Women in AFSOC aircraft have come a long way since the mid-1990s. We still have some ways to go, but I'm confident that AFSOC will continue paving the way for women to grow, thrive, and succeed now and in the future.

About the Author: Col Tracy Onufer is the Chief of Staff at Special Operations Command South in Homestead AFB, FL. She previously served as the Vice Commander of the 352nd SOW at RAF Mildenhall and Commander of the 16th SOS at Cannon AFB. She was assigned to AFSOC straight out of navigator and electronic warfare school and has served in the SOF enterprise for her entire career outside of formal training and education. She is a lifetime member of the ACA.

HELP YOUR FELLOW AIR COMMANDOS

Direct Donations & Planned Giving

Each year crucial and time-pressing Air Commando financial needs are unmet by federal agencies or large institutional charities. The Air Commando Foundation meets many of those needs - *we could do more.* The ACF is a *zero overhead* 501-c-3 charity, all donations go directly to urgent needs. Planned Giving and direct donations are a win-win for those in need and those who donate through Planned Giving.

~ Validated Air Commando and family needs are met

~ You pass your Air Commando legacy forward by helping teammates and families

~ IRA distributions to the Foundation (up to $100K/year) are not taxed - dollar for dollar to the need.

AIR COMMANDO FOUNDATION

Contact the ACA at 850-581-0099 for more information Monday - Friday • 9am - 4pm

POWER YOUR CAREER WITH NEWMAN UNIVERSITY'S BUSINESS AND STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE (BSI) DEGREE

ONLINE DELIVERY

CUTTING-EDGE PROGRAM EQUIPS YOU FOR SUCCESS IN ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING FIELDS IN THE U.S.

Newman's BSI program is designed to give students a holistic understanding of how analysts optimally perform in an increasingly competitive, complex and challenging environment.

Finish in as few as 24 months! Multiple start dates throughout the year

LEARN MORE:
NEWMANU.EDU/BSI

NEWMAN UNIVERSITY

A Degree of Difference

ANNA GARCIA-LUCAS

TACTICAL COMMUNICATIONS

By Anna Garcia-Lucas, SMSgt (Ret) USAF

Growing up, my father and I often watched war movies featuring "John Wayne" characters who epitomized courage and humble service. I learned early on the good guy is supposed to take care of others. John Wayne was the ideal answer to "this is who I want to be when I grow up." He was not exactly what a young Hispanic woman was supposed to strive for, but my desire to serve began with those movies.

I grew up poor and was not the best-behaved student in class. I rebelled in most things except Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC). College was not in my cards, but the years I spent in NJROTC meant I could join the military and graduate basic training as an E-3. None of the Services had immediate openings, so I enlisted in the New Mexico Air National Guard (NMANG). I initially signed up as a radio operator because both my mother and father were radiomen in the US Navy. At the encouragement of my recruiter, I tested, passed, and became a computer operator, so went to tech school to learn tactical and computer communications.

My time in the NMANG made me want to experience more of what the Air Force had to offer and in 1988 I transitioned to the active duty Air Force. My first active duty assignment was to Kunsan AB, Republic of Korea, as a telecommunications specialist. By 1993, I had been promoted to Staff Sergeant and moved to Royal Air Force Base (RAF) Alconbury, in the 710th Communications Squadron working communications security, TEMPEST, and computer security .

I first came across Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) in 1993, when the 352nd Special Operations Group (SOG) moved to RAF Alconbury, in the UK. They were known on base as a group that colored outside the lines, who saw opportunity in the face of adversity, and overcame obstacles that stopped others. It seemed to me that these airmen were special because they approached problems differently than what I had experienced in the conventional Air Force.

In 1995, the 352nd SOG moved from RAF Alconbury to RAF Mildenhall, UK, and I received an assignment to join them, specifically as a part of the SOG's special operations command and control element (SOCCE). My life would never be the same.

My real-life introduction to being an Air Commando and part of the SOCCE began with rotations to San Vito del Normanni AS, Italy, in the radio room. Panicking, I explained I only knew computers and that my tech school had not covered radio operations. All I could imagine was a clumsy computer operator talking to an aircraft, flubbing it, and causing a crash. It scared me enough to pay close attention.

Now retired Chiefs Mark "Hammer" Connelly and Rogerio "Roger" Garcia started training me on the different frequency and satellite communications radios we used to communicate with the aircraft and with our special tactics operators on the ground. Roger began teaching me frequency hopping. We had long discussions on the stratosphere, ionosphere, and how to get radio waves travelling long distances.

I was manning the radio room one weekend by myself and setting up for an exercise, when then Lt Col Barnett walked in and calmly let me know that we were no longer preparing for an exercise, but now a real-world mission. A ground team in the Balkans had lost communications with the aircrew as they made their way toward the MH-53 Pave Low helicopter. Despite troubleshooting the systems, communications between the ground team and the aircraft could not be restored. Time was becoming critical and the aircrew were saying they would need to leave the pickup area very soon. I became the communications relay, conveying messages between the ground team who were working their way towards the helicopter as best they could in a hostile environment, and the aircrew who were feeling the growing tension as they waited in their own dangerous situation. The silence between the radio calls seemed to last forever, and then I got the one notifying me the

team and their cargo were onboard and in the air.

I copied the last transmission, shaking because I would not know until they returned to base if everyone was safe. Finally, Col Barnett walked in, offered me some pizza, and told me, "Good job." Those simple acts gave me some relief until an aircrew member walked in and thanked me for the work. That event cemented my lifetime loyalty to AFSOC. That night, I learned the significance of two of the three command's values: ready today, relevant tomorrow, and how those values related to taking care of others. The time my colleagues and bosses invested in me through cross-functional training paid off. Everyone around me had worked to ensure I was ready for exercises and missions.

My next assignment with AFSOC was in 2000, at the headquarters as the Command Communications Security (COMSEC) Manager. That job gave me a different perspective on the scope of the missions we were involved in. In September of 2001, as I was about to give a briefing on Law of Armed Conflict to my classmates attending the NCO Academy, someone ran in yelling about airplanes hitting the World Trade Center towers. Those of us from AFSOC knew what was coming next and we began to pack our things.

The global war on terror emptied AFSOC's squadrons. Part of my job was to ensure those organizations who depended on cryptographic keying material and equipment had what they needed to securely communicate wherever they were sent. This challenge was proving to be difficult as the Air Force in 2001 was not prepared to deliver COMSEC to the numerous remote and austere sites where special operations forces were operating. We were advised to ensure AFSOC mission packages deployed with enough cryptographic material to operate securely for 60 days, and to come up with a plan to take care of those depending on COMSEC when the two months were up.

Knowing that AFSOC tactical communications squadrons supported our special operations aircraft, I pitched an idea to my supervisor: if we could deploy into the area of responsibility with broad orders allowing us to visit every location AFSOC forces were operating from, we could leverage theater and AFSOC airlift to deliver the COMSEC materials in time to meet the squadrons' needs. We did not necessarily need to have a set itinerary, we simply needed to be able to catch a ride to each location. The idea was far from foolproof, broke some rules, and was filled with holes, so the plan was shelved as naïve and risky.

On Thanksgiving, my supervisor, MSgt James Charity, called and told me to go home and pack. "They're using the plan," he said. He and I would deploy instead of putting anyone else in danger if the plan failed. Within a couple of weeks, we had blanket orders citing the long list of operating locations, plus the ominous "variations authorized" giving us the authorization to go to other locations as yet unknown. We were issued weapons and 60 rounds of ammunition each, along with COMSEC material and a green canvas A-bag for our gear. Then we headed into theater.

Upon arrival in the Middle East we began to hitchhike on C-130 aircraft to the next location, requesting the radio operator on the airplane notify the tactical comm guys at the operating location when would be arriving. We left all our personal belongings behind, except what we could fit into a backpack. AFSOC is a small community and given the interdependence each function has on the other: medics,

special tactics, aircrew, supply, comm, and maintenance, arriving at each location was like a mini family reunion.

The first two nights of flying and delivering COMSEC materials to the units were uneventful. That changed, though, when we were invited to hop a flight that would take us directly to the next location instead of waiting for another flight scheduled for a couple of days later. However, as one of the aircrew members described it, "It'll take you over a high risk area." He said it was up to us and no one would bear the responsibility if anything happened. Once aboard, another crew member knelt close to my face and asked, "Have you attended SERE (survival, evasion, resistance, and evasion) training?" "No," I answered.

"Well, if anything happens, if we go down, reach up and find the wire up there. Follow it all the way out the back and run. Run as fast as you can. You're gonna get caught so be ready. You might be raped or killed, I don't know which is worse. Just run." Looking up, I saw I was too short to reach the wire.

At some point during the flight, the loadmaster shook me awake and told me to take off my Kevlar body armor. He motioned me to sit on it, buckle back in, and then he put his foot on my chest and pulled the straps so tight I could barely move. I never knew until that moment what tactical aircraft maneuvers were. The evasive tactics lifted one of the loadmasters off his feet. At one point, the G-forces felt like an elephant was sitting on me. As the pilots were evading ground fire, I could make out green streaks of light from tracer ammunition outside one of the aircraft windows. Then, as suddenly as it had started, all was calm.

Upon landing and piling into the back of a truck, one guy slapped my shoulder and asked what I thought about the ride. I told him it was pretty cool, before another told me to shut up. "We were being shot at. We could've been hit. You had no business on that flight. None," he said. It was a sobering realization of the danger Air Commandos and the teams they carry encounter so many times during their missions. As a communicator, I never had a clue and never appreciated what the aircrews did for a living. That flight gave me a different understanding of what it meant to be an Air Commando.

Looking back at my 3 assignments with AFSOC over 27 years of military service, and adding 6 more years as a civilian with AFSOC, I understand what drew me to special operations and to this way of life. The men and women of AFSOC hold fast to our motto of anytime, anywhere. Our missions, training, and experiences strengthen the courage, camaraderie, and resilience we have.

Two of my friends, Rodney Young and Jeff Pohl were aircrew aboard Ditka 03 in February 2002. I listened to the radio chatter and the arguments regarding their rescue while I was deployed to Khandahar, Afghanistan. I understood the context of the discussion and their eventual self-recovery. Jeff's desire to return to the fight, to "get back to work with the guys" despite his massive injuries is a testament to who we are.

I was the J6 at Khandahar 10 years later, and marveled at the reports I received about a young, tactical communication airman who was forward deployed in support of a medical civic action team. He was carrying a small C2 system and a weapon when he took fire, yet he continued to work the equipment and support the team. He had no hesitation and later described what

he did as "just doing my job." Similarly, I was blown away by the bravery of the aircrews flying the C-145 SkyTrucks, miraculously returning to base after a shot narrowly missed the copilot's head. The crew was ready to head back out the next day.

It was not unusual for folks to come to my office, to sit and talk after receiving bad news or going through significant events. The surgeon with our special operations surgical team who was called in to the hospital at Khandahar to help following a bloody mission, burst into the comm room one night, visibly upset about having to work on one of the insurgent's injuries instead of one of our own people. He was called back into the operating room shortly afterward. You learn to just listen because there are no real words you can say at that point.

I felt the same about the special tactics teams stopping in after their missions and the maintainers who survived rockets hitting the flight line where they were working. They would come in and talk about work, home, emotions, and tell jokes before going back to whatever it was they were doing. Any movie heroes I had as a kid paled in comparison to the courage, selflessness, and fellowship I encountered in Afghanistan.

Years later as a contractor working on the special mission systems aboard our aircraft, the men and women I deployed with carried forth the tradition of readiness, relevance, and resilience, married to integrity, service, and excellence. And they did so every time and in every place.

I have deployed as the non-commissioned officer in charge of a network control center, as a First Sergeant, as a COMSEC Manager, as a J6, and as a system administrator for the mission network systems aboard AFSOC aircraft. In this list of varied experiences, I had the opportunity to learn many different aspects of the communications field as both a follower and a leader. I held close to CMSgt "Taco" Sanchez's charge to take care of people, motivate others, help them build their self-worth, and always remember our history. And, I tried to follow CMSgt Keen's model of a leader ensuring that the troops are taken care of before themselves.

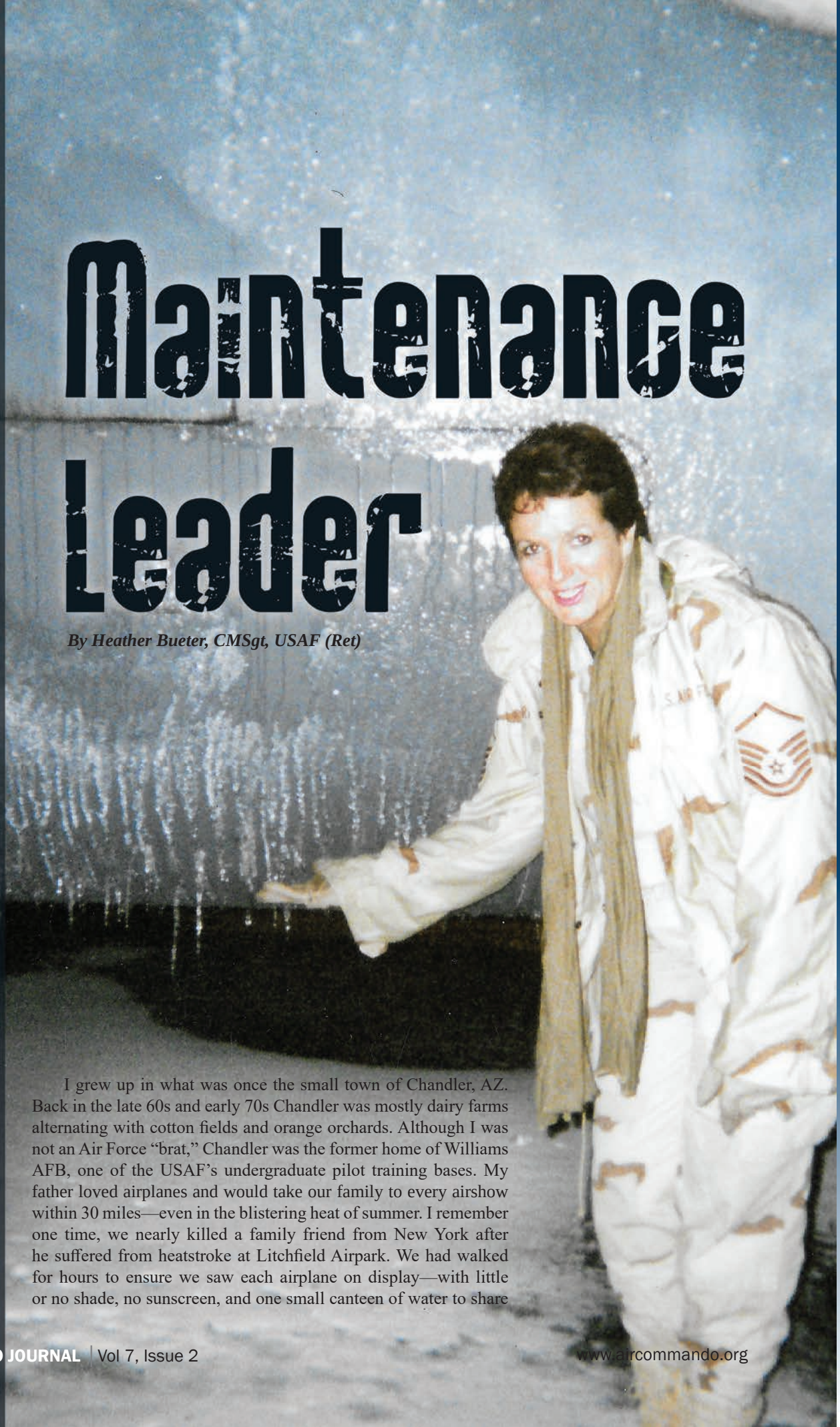
The person I am today is because of the Air Commandos who trained me, deployed with me, fellowshipped with me, and laughed and cried with me. I am the culmination of my mentors, role models, and leaders who walked before me. I held and hold dear the fact that my teams and our missions created the interdependency we had with one another. I understand my past and those mentoring moments have become resources I now pass on to young Airmen today. AFSOC taught me that I am always working in the moment for tomorrow. I have never wanted to be with another command as a military member or a civilian.

About the Author: SMSgt (Ret) Anna Garcia-Lucas is a 27-year veteran and ACA life member. Her assignments include 352d SOSS SOCCE, HQ AFSOC and 27 SOCS Tactical Communications. She retired from active duty in 2012 and now works for HQ AFSOC A6 as a federal civilian. She is also an Episcopal Seminarian. Anna, her husband, MSgt (Ret) Bryan Lucas, and their children live in Navarre, FL.

HEATHER BUETER

Maintenance Leader

By Heather Bueter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)



I grew up in what was once the small town of Chandler, AZ. Back in the late 60s and early 70s Chandler was mostly dairy farms alternating with cotton fields and orange orchards. Although I was not an Air Force "brat," Chandler was the former home of Williams AFB, one of the USAF's undergraduate pilot training bases. My father loved airplanes and would take our family to every airshow within 30 miles—even in the blistering heat of summer. I remember one time, we nearly killed a family friend from New York after he suffered from heatstroke at Litchfield Airpark. We had walked for hours to ensure we saw each airplane on display—with little or no shade, no sunscreen, and one small canteen of water to share

With your help, the children of fallen Air Commandos can achieve their dreams.

"If it wasn't for SOWF I wouldn't be the professional teacher that I am today. Every success that I made and continue to make in my life SOWF will be there at the top of the list for all of the thanks and recognition that they deserve for helping me carve my future."
Steven Schmauss,
Texas Tech, C/O 2017

Steven is the son of Air Force SSgt. Mark J. Schmauss, who lost his life in Kuwait in 1991.

CHARITY NAVIGATOR
Four Star Charity

SPECIAL OPERATIONS WARRIOR FOUNDATION

SEAL OF TRANSPARENCY
2018 PLATINUM
GUIDESTAR

Special Operations Warrior Foundation ensures full college educations to the surviving children of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps special operations personnel who lose their life in the line of duty. Special Operations Warrior Foundation also provides immediate financial stipends to severely wounded special operators.

Sheppard AFB 1985 (All photos courtesy of author)

between the five. That canteen had run dry hours earlier. Our family was acclimated—the New Yorker was not. He survived, but I don't believe he ever came to visit us after that. But I digress … I think those airshows were where my love of airplanes began. There and with the World War II model aircraft my dad would meticulously build and then hang by fishing line from my parents' bedroom ceiling. We could look but we couldn't touch, of course. Those models were not toys, they were works of art!

I lived in a middle-class neighborhood – the youngest of four children. There was never a question about what my future held. I was always an "A" student, but as I approached high school, I began to lack direction. I distinctly remember the first day of my sophomore year of high school. I knew I did not want to go to college anymore. I didn't exactly know what I wanted, but it was not college. In Chandler, you either stayed forever—got married, had children, grew old, and died in Chandler, or you got out.

At the time, I was working at my first job, a local Burger King franchise. One of the managers took me under his wing and suggested I join the Air Force. His father had served for 28 years and his biggest selling point, besides getting out of Chandler and seeing the world, was that the Air Force was the most like a "9-to-5 job of the other Services." I suppose he saw some potential in me beyond making burgers and babies. In January 1985, I went to the recruiter in Phoenix and took my test.

Afterwards, reviewing the scores with the recruiter, he told me the computer had determined I would be 99.8% qualified for a career as an Aircraft Maintenance Journeyman, that is, a crew chief. In my naivete, I signed up for the job the computer said I'd be the best at, even though the mechanical portion of the test was my lowest score. I joined the Air Force through delayed enlistment to become an aircraft maintainer later that year. Of course, I found out later the scoring had nothing to do with my qualifications and everything to do with the recruiter filling quotas.

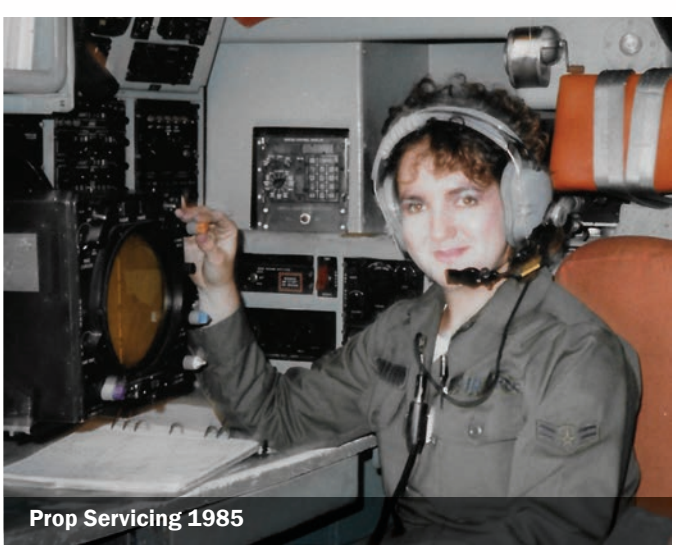
My first assignment was to the 41st Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (CAMS) at McClellan AFB, near Sacramento, CA. After two years of cutting my teeth on HC-130P/N aircraft with the 41st CAMS, McClellan AFB was closed down and I was reassigned to the 8/16th Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU) at the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) at Hurlburt Field in October 1987. This squadron provided flightline service to both the MC-130E Talon Is of the 8th SOS and the AC-130H Spectres of the 16th SOS. We also had responsibility for two "slick" C-130Es assigned to the wing for pilot proficiency.

It was an exciting time to be in AFSOC. The 23rd Air Force had just moved from Scott AFB to Hurlburt Field. At McClellan AFB we maintained four aircraft with two shifts. Now I was in a fast-paced outfit supporting 12 aircraft with 3 shifts plus weekend duty. It was overwhelming to say the least. In the combined AMU, crew chiefs were segregated by weapon system and the specialists were shared.

I had made Senior Airman below-the-zone while at McClellan and sewed on Sergeant shortly after my arrival at Hurlburt. I was assigned to one of the gunships as the 4th or 5th "wipe" as they called the junior maintainers under the Dedicated Crew Chief (DCC) and Assistant Crew Chief (ACC). The DCC and ACC were the ones lucky enough to have their names painted above the crew entrance door. I had been a DCC in the 41st CAMS, but with so many great people in line ahead of me, and so many aircraft at Hurlburt, the dream of crewing my own gunship seemed impossible.

I did my best to learn all I could from the SSgts and TSgts around me. I carried my own toolbox and pulled my own weight. I did not want to give anyone a reason to say I did not belong on the flightline in a "man's world." I believe I was earning the respect of my peers and superiors, but it wasn't long before I discovered I was pregnant and would need to come off the flightline I loved so much. I was brought into the office to manage the crew chiefs' training and appointment schedules. This was long before automated email reminders and the internet-based learning systems. We wrote paper reminders and distributed them at roll call so the troops would remember to complete their annual training. I was also responsible for scheduling their annual dental and medical appointments, and their promotion testing.

Although the work was mundane, I enjoyed being in the



Prop Servicing 1985

office near the flight chief—it was always the hub of news and activity. As soon as my maternity leave was over I was ready to get back to working on airplanes, but then I was in my own soap opera. I was getting divorced from my husband and falling for another gunship crew chief. The next several years were a flurry of personal and professional activity. I remarried in the fall of 1989, and two months later the gunships deployed to Panama for Operation JUST CAUSE. Because I was due to meet an NCO of the Quarter Board, my flight chief kept me home. This was to be my first real-world opportunity to deploy and I was sidelined. Obviously, I was disappointed, but my boss made me feel that missing the Quarterly Awards Board would disappoint him even more. He told me I'd have other opportunities.

My flight chief was right, there would be more opportunities. Within six months of getting remarried, I was pregnant again, so I ended up staying behind when we deployed for Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. After my maternity leave I returned to the flightline. When I made SSgt I became the ACC on 69-6576, and eventually DCC on 6575. My name was now above the crew door. In the early 1990s, maintainers were asked to begin training on the AC-130U Ghostrider, the new "U-model" gunship still undergoing developmental testing at Edwards AFB, CA. I volunteered to be part of that initial cadre. I thought it would be an exciting opportunity and had been hearing for years that the AC-130H's retirement was imminent.

We went to Edwards AFB for familiarization training, but when we arrived the Test Wing maintainers treated us with disdain. They had been told we were there for manning assistance. After six weeks we learned how to apply external power and external cooling air to the U-model. And, although I had to force myself on people to get the training, I learned the main differences in the flight deck and became qualified to run the engines. Everything else we taught ourselves back at Hurlburt Field as the AC-130Us rolled in one at a time. Initially the AC-130Hs and AC-130Us stayed together in one AMU, but as more U-models arrived on station, it was clear it was time to break away and become a stand-alone AMU.

During those early days there was a shortage of specialists, tools, and test equipment needed to keep both the H-models and U-models flying. Many of the write-ups on our aircraft were software and mission-computer related, often waiting on software revisions. Our aircraft discrepancy forms sometimes reached 40 – 50 pages or more. To a crew chief accustomed to maybe eight pages, this was extremely frustrating. After pinning on TSgt and serving as DCC on 89-0512 for a few months, I became a flightline expediter. Expeditors dispatch the crew chiefs to each aircraft to get them ready for flight or to support other maintenance requirements. Expeditors also keep tabs on specialist work and report the status of all ongoing and upcoming maintenance activities to the production supervisor. The job is critical to flightline maintenance operations and a good expediter can make or break the team. After learning as much as I could as an expediter, I was moved to the Maintenance Operations Control Center (MOCC).

The MOCC was a 24/7/365 operation located in the

Elmendorf AFB, Anchorage, Alaska

center of the wing command post. There were three "board controllers" – one each overseeing the maintenance and status of the gunships, the MC-130H Talon IIs, and the MH-53 Pave Lows. A senior controller supervised the other three, recorded the status of the MC-130P Shadows and HH-60 Pave Hawks stationed at Eglin AFB, and compiled the status documents for the Maintenance Group (MXG) commander. The senior controller would brief the wing commander on aircraft status every Monday.

I worked the gunship board for 90 days to learn the role, then trained for a month with a senior controller until I was running a shift on my own. Swing shift was the busiest shift—keeping track of all launch and recovery data for each sortie. Grave shift was "PowerPoint nightmare," compiling all the data and building slides for the morning meeting. At 0630, the

SUPPORT SYSTEMS ASSOCIATES, INC.

www.ssai.org

"Support is our FIRST name"
And
We are your FIRST choice for support in
Engineering and Logistics

Engineering Services and Modification Programs:
Airborne Mission Networking
AC/MC-130J Software
MC/AC-130H/U/W Mode S/EHS
HH-60 Mode S/5

POC:
Michael C. Reynolds
3rd AFSOC Command Chief
Vice President, Business Development
mreynolds@ssai.org
478-335-1442 (Mobile)
478-328-8377 X2162 (Office)

Corporate Headquarters 321/724-5566 Fax 321/724-6673
Marina Towers, 709 S. Harbor City Boulevard, Suite 350, Melbourne, FL 32901-1942

deputy maintenance group commander would come in to start asking questions about the missions from the night before. I really enjoyed this job, it was fast-paced and demanding, especially on swing shift when most of the sortie generation occurred. I also had the opportunity to deploy six times to San Vito del Normanni AS, Italy, to support the Operations PROVIDE PROMISE and DENY FLIGHT. This opportunity afforded me and my family three things: I finished my Associate's Degree, my husband went back to the flightline from his position in Quality Assurance, and before I left MOCC I had a line number for MSgt.

After leaving the MOCC I went back to the 4th AMU as a flight chief. I was reunited with many of my beloved crew chiefs from the 16th AMU who had become the U-model cadre in the 4th AMU. They had stuck it out through the early struggles and developed into a fine team maintaining a fleet of now 13 aircraft. I had two trusted TSgts that worked for me as lead technicians managing the schedule and training the younger enlisted troops. They kept most of the disciplinary actions at their level.

Bagram Afghanistan as Maintenance Super with J4 Lt McCoy, 2005.

After sewing on MSgt, I learned the "joys" of enlisted performance reports, a real challenge in a squadron with hundreds of enlisted maintainers, and having to stand tall in front of the First Sergeant when one of my people failed a dorm inspection or did not return a rented Rug Doctor to the base shopette. It was like being a mother to 40 teenagers sometimes—great highs, but also some disappointing moments. I tried to make the best of this position, and I learned a lot about taking care of people, but truthfully, I longed to be back out on the flightline—generating airpower. I was told I had to do my time as a flight chief, probably at least a year, before I could be considered for the coveted position of production supervisor. Disappointed, but undeterred, every chance I got I volunteered to stand-in as the production supervisor on an exercise or deployment, or on weekends.

Then 9/11 happened and I got my chance. The 1st SOW deployed a six-ship package of AC-130Us to the Middle East. When we left Hurlburt Field, we did not know where we were going or when we'd be back. We were not allowed to call, write, or email home. This was the real deal, or at least the closest I had ever come. We had to set up our own tents, another first for me, and then had to do it again a day or two later because we had pitched them too close to a mosque and it upset the locals who worked on the base. It was hot and dry, which made it difficult to sleep during the day. We worked long hours to bed down the people, the aircraft, and our equipment. The aircrews planned their missions and within days we were launching and recovering all six aircraft. Like many, I thought, maybe naively, that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban would quickly surrender as had happened during the First Gulf War. No one predicted we would still be there nearly 17 years later.

Almost immediately after returning from theater, I was offered my dream job, production supervisor. I had arrived! This is the top of the food chain for a crew chief. We had a very strong team of "pro supers" and flightline expeditors to execute the daily and weekly flying and maintenance schedules. We built great rapport with the 4th SOS Director of Operations and tried our best to meet their training needs despite many of the aircraft being deployed. The 4th AMU had the best statistics for mission capable rates, mission effectiveness rates, and lowest repeat/recur discrepancy rates in the entire 1st SOMXG. While assigned to the 4th AMU, I was awarded the Maintenance Professional of the Year at the Group level and the General Lew Allen Award for AFSOC.

As the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. When I was presented a line number for SMSgt I was also given an assignment to the 719th Special Operations Maintenance Squadron (SOMXS) at Duke Field. It was bittersweet because I was leaving behind an aircraft I loved, an AMU that was at the top of their game, and a base I had been stationed at for 16 years. But, it was a way to keep me in the AFSOC "family."

Duke Field back then was like stepping back in time. Many of the buildings had been built in the late 1940s. The base theater, where I had my promotion ceremony, was where a portion of the movie "Twelve O'Clock High" was filmed. The 719th was an Active Associate Unit – an active duty unit merged with a reserve unit. The Reserves had operational control of the aircraft and each squadron retained administrative control of their people.

Together, we maintained the MC-130E Talon I, the same airplanes that had been combined with the AC-130Hs in the old 8/16th AMU back in 1987. I was a maintenance flight chief and supervised the crew chiefs, production supervisors, Dash 21 section (support equipment such as life rafts, portable oxygen bottles, and first aid kits), and consolidated tool kit section.

In January 2006, I was reassigned to the 1st SOAMXS. I remember arriving at Eglin AFB on Thursday and jumping into an Operation Readiness Exercise the following Monday. This assignment had an element of symmetry as I was back to working on MC-130Ps, an upgraded version of the HC-130P/N I started my career working on. This unit was unique in the fact that it was a little piece of AFSOC plunked down in the middle of an Air Force Materiel Command, fighter-

oriented, test base. The 1 SOAMXS owned all the elements of a maintenance group: an aircraft maintenance flight, an equipment maintenance flight, sheet metal technicians, fuels technicians, aerospace ground equipment technicians, and our own MOCC.

I was the Lead Production Superintendent for our nine aircraft and worked with the flying squadron to balance their training and operational objectives with the maintenance and modification requirements for the aircraft. About eight months after my arrival, the Maintenance Chief deployed and I was tapped to fill his role. We had a strong team in Production so my vacancy was fairly transparent, but stepping into the Chief's shoes seemed a daunting task. We survived his deployment without too much irreparable harm, but while filling the Chief's role I learned more about myself than perhaps in any other position I had had. I also realized the kind of Chief I wanted to be one day, and the kind of Chief I did not want to be. Soon, I would be given that chance.

I remember that morning like it was yesterday. I had just finished the morning aircraft status meeting. My squadron commander was calling my name as he came down the hallway toward the production office. He had a stern look on his face and declared the group commander had called him because I had screwed something up on the morning meeting slides. This was not a surprise as the SOAMXG commander was a stickler for typographical errors and the accuracy of aircraft status and the sortie effectiveness data. My commander handed me a sheet of paper with a number on it, asking, "Does this number mean anything to you?" I cleared my throat and said, "No sir. I have no idea what he could be talking about. I know for a fact my slides were perfect today."

He said, "Look again. Are you sure this number doesn't mean anything to you?" And then my commander, who I had known since he was a captain in the 4th AMU as a maintenance officer, could no longer contain his smile. He beamed and hugged me and said, "Congratulations, Chief Bueter!"

I had made it. This had been my goal since my very first career advisory session, in 1986 at McClellan AFB. TSgt De Los Santos told me then, "If you want to stay in the Air Force, get out of maintenance. You don't see too many female Chiefs in maintenance." I didn't take his advice and it drove me all those years to prove him wrong.

I spent my last year on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. I deployed to Iraq for a year as the Maintenance Superintendent of the 1st Expeditionary SOMXS, hoping to get a Base of Preference (BOP) assignment when I returned. As the mission diminished in Iraq, the decision was made to move most SOF aircraft and maintenance to Bagram, Afghanistan. About halfway through my year in Iraq I moved with the squadron to Afghanistan. This was my fifth deployment, and the longest. It was challenging to be away from my family and I knew the burden it placed on those left at home, but I also found it the most professionally rewarding. When you're deployed to the AOR, you feel like this is what it's all for—all the blood, sweat, tears, long hours, and thankless work, to bring the fight to the enemy.

I had hoped for a BOP when I returned from Afghanistan and stay in the local area, but instead I received an assignment to Nellis AFB, NV, to be the Superintendent of an F-22 AMU. While it was an honor to be offered a leadership position in a new weapon system, my husband had a good job at Hurlburt, my daughter was a senior in high school, and I had been offered a job as a civilian logistician with the 413th Flight Test Squadron for the HC/MC-130J Developmental Test Program. I made a heart-wrenching decision to retire rather than PCS. It wasn't a decision I made lightly. I had lived a stable, PCS-free life at Hurlburt, Duke, and Eglin, but I worked hard every day of my career and never backed down from a challenge. I also never turned down a deployment. I

learned a lot from both the good and bad supervisors, and when it was my turn to supervise I did my best to take care of my people. I hope that is what they'll remember when they throw the dirt on my casket.

About the Author: CMSgt (Ret) Heather Bueter served 23 of her 25-year career in Air Force Special Operations Command, maintaining AC-130H, AC-130U, MC-130E, and MC-130P aircraft, in positions ranging from crew chief to Squadron Superintendent. She currently works for USSOCOM Detachment 1 at Eglin AFB as logistics liaison to the AC-130J Modification Program and provides developmental test support on AC-130J and AC-130W aircraft. She and her husband, Christopher Bueter, have two grown children, two stepchildren and three grandchildren. She lives in Navarre, FL.

ALLISON BLACK

One Woman's Journey to Becoming An Air Commando

By Allison Black, Lt Col, USAF

In 1992, I enlisted in the Air Force for the chance to contribute to something greater than myself. While in basic military training I was introduced to the SERE (survival, escape, resistance, and evasion) career field and volunteered for the challenge. After graduating SERE specialist training, I spent six years working in the mountains of Washington and Alaska training Air Force aviators and operators how to survive and return home with honor. As a young Airman, SERE NCOs taught me what "right" looked like and I carry that image with me today. There's no doubt the mentorship and tough love I received back then laid the foundation for my leadership style today.

Fast forward a few years, past finishing college, commissioning, and undergraduate navigator training. My goal was to fly in AFSOC and I was lucky enough to receive my assignment of choice to the 16th Special Operations Squadron and the AC-130H Spectre Gunship. I arrived at Hurlburt Field in early 2000, and months after checking in someone mentioned I was the first female navigator ever assigned to the 16th SOS. Although surprising, I knew every operator had to prove their worth so I was determined to let my actions to speak for me instead of my gender.

As a young gunship navigator, my goal was to become a "Nav" that any aircraft commander and crew would be proud to fly with in combat. I was so excited to be a part of this unit and its mission area that I worked hard to ensure I became an asset and not a liability. The "Es" (enlisted crewmembers) of the 16th SOS were never shy about providing me raw, unfiltered feedback about my performance on a mission or anything else for that matter. Just like with my SERE brothers, being a Spectre reinforced the importance of professionalism, integrity and credibility. As a young officer, my teammates at the 16th SOS took me by the scruff of the neck and taught me what being a Spectre and an Air Commando really meant. For that I'm grateful.

As a female Spectre aircrew, I may have looked, acted, and sounded different than the men but I couldn't let those differences become a barrier to mission success. Quite often, I found my Spectre teammates insulating me from those who believed women shouldn't be a part of our organization. Although I didn't come to AFSOC to change anyone's mind about women in SOF, over the years I found that my performance helped achieve that effect. Admittedly, there were times where the negativity got me to question whether I had the ability to be successful. Fortunately, my circle of trust reinforced my reasons for joining and reminded me why I needed to stay. With their support I learned to dismiss the nay-sayers by allowing my hard work and actions on target speak for me.

Growing up as a woman Air Commando didn't come without its challenges. Constantly standing out from the crowd, when all you want to do is blend in with your crew was frustrating. For many years I was super-sensitive to anyone discussing my gender, but that faded as I became comfortable in my own skin and confident in my ability to do the job. Over time, I've realized that it's just as important to recognize women for what they bring to the fight as it is for men. I've learned to embrace the difference between how our male and female Air Commandos attack a problem and find solutions. It's been incredible to watch our enterprise attract more women and see the gender shock disappear amongst the force.

ANGEL OF DEATH

The "Angel of Death" story is an example of how gender played a significant role during one gunship mission, but was unknown to our crew at the time.

We landed at AFSOC's northern deployed location in late November 2001. The next evening the ADVON planners gave "Miller's crew" our mission data which consisted of the team's call sign, their grid location, and a radio frequency. I remember the excitement of stepping to the airplane for my first combat mission. We knew exactly why we were there and couldn't wait to hunt down the terrorists responsible for the attacks on 9/11. I'm a born and raised New Yorker so the chance to get some payback felt a little extra special. Our crews cast of characters was a deliberate mix of old and new blood. Led by Miller, it included Adams, Cozad, Radford, Black, Ron John, Joe G, Gregg, Danny P, Matt, Dusty, Kevin, and Dickie.

Once we arrived in the vicinity of the Special Forces team we were supporting, ODA 595, located near Konduz, Afghanistan, we established radio contact and got a SITREP (situation report). We were instructed to hunt for armored vehicles and once we positively identified them we were cleared to engage. We were then asked to get our "eyes" on a vehicle headed towards their position. Once we identified the vehicle and passed its location we were again cleared to engage.

Just as our crew was about to fire, the vehicle pulled up to a building in the middle of nowhere with other vehicles and many other adult males. As a crew, we decided to hold our fire and report the details of what appeared to be a meeting house. After a brief "standby" from ODA 595, the controller came back and said, "Those are confirmed Taliban. You're cleared hot." I remember looking over at the fire control officer (FCO) and thinking "game on." From that point, our crew proceeded to unload 100 rounds of 105mm and 400 rounds of 40mm. Without proximity rounds available and in an effort to maximize the effects of every round, we would shoot and wait for the remaining enemy combatants to regroup in the field before shooting again. It was apparent that the enemy had no idea where the fires were coming from and had nowhere to run.

The rest of the story was relayed to us by members of ODA 595 a week or so after this specific mission.

As I was relaying the target effects to the ODA, General Dostum, the senior Afghan commander who was co-located

Gen T. Michael Moseley CSAF awards Maj Allison Black with the new Air Force Combat Action Medal at a ceremony in Washington, DC. Major Black, 1st Special Operations Group, was one of six Airmen from the entire Air Force selected to participate in the historic ceremony. (Photo courtesy of USAF/Ilene Allen)

Lt Col Allison Black, the commander of the 319th SOS, escorts Lt Col (Ret) Richard E. Cole before a building renaming and dedication ceremony at Hurlburt Field, FL, 7 Apr 2017. Cole is the last surviving Doolittle Raider whose Air Force roots date back to the origination of the 319th SOS. (Photo courtesy of USAF SrA Krystal M. Garrett)

Lt Col Black shows Lt Col (Ret) Cole a framed photo after a building renaming and dedication ceremony at Hurlburt Field. (Photo courtesy of USAF SrA Krystal M. Garrett)

with the team, could hear me on the radio. He asked the guys if that was a woman he was hearing. When they replied yes, he couldn't believe it. He laughed and said "America is so determined, they bring their women to kill Taliban." Gen Dostum then got on his radio to the Taliban our crew was engaging to tell them, in so many words, "You are pathetic. American women are killing you. Surrender now." Gen Dostum then keyed the mike on his radio as I was talking to the ODA so they could hear my voice.

Back inside the gunship, we were using the IZLID (infrared laser pointer and illuminator) to aid our own situational awareness and help track, sort out, and engage the different groups of enemy fighters. As this was going on, Gen Dostum had access to the ODA's NVGs and could see the beam from laser pointer. He had always believed America had a death ray and now he could see it. From his perspective our IZLID was being used to blow up the enemy. This only enhanced Dostum's taunting rhetoric on the radio to the enemy we were actively engaging. He claimed the Angel of Death was there to rain death and destruction upon them so they really had no choice but to surrender.

Our mission came to an end not for a lack of targets, but a lack of ammo and just enough gas to get back to base. We headed home just as the next gunship was arriving on scene to continue supporting the ODA. I've had the opportunity to fly many combat missions in the AC-130H and I can't remember most of the details. That night in 2001 was different, though. I remember the excitement from the crew, all the spent brass laying on the floor in the back of the aircraft, and the pride we felt for having this incredible chance to take the fight to the enemy. I remember saying, "Wow, this is combat?" To which some of my fellow "senior" crewmembers reminded me that they had been waiting for a mission like this their entire careers. I considered myself lucky to have been a part of it.

A week or so later ODA 595 walked into our operations center with this story. They carried a gift from General Dostum for our crew's efforts that night—an AK-47 assault rifle. They also told us that General Dostum used the story of the Angel of Death at a burqa unveiling ceremony for Afghan women. He explained that, America allows their women to fly airplanes in combat and kill the Taliban. One day, he hoped, Afghan women would have those same freedoms. Instantly we all felt a sense of Spectre pride knowing our mission was a job well done. That rifle, along with a signed picture of ODA 595 and Gen Dostum is hanging somewhere in the 16th SOS as a small part of the unit's incredible history.

The early days of my journey as an Airman and Air Commando are probably not much different than most. As SOF professionals we have each contributed our small piece to the community's legacy. The success and opportunities I've enjoyed over my 27-year military career are directly linked to the support of my family and the incredible men and women across our special operations enterprise. My story is just one of thousands of incredible Air Commandos who raised their hand and volunteered to serve. I'm humbled to be a part of it.

About the Author: Lt Col Allison Black is a master navigator and USAF Weapon School graduate. She has over 3400 flying hours and 2000+ hours in combat flying the AC-130H and U-28A. Between 2000 – 2009 Allison was stationed at Hurlburt Field and served at the squadron, group, wing, and headquarter levels. From 2013 – 2017 she had the privilege to serve as the director of operations and squadron commander of the 319th SOS. She currently works at HQ USSOCOM. Allison has been married to Ryan for over 23 years and they have two incredible boys, Connor and Cooper.

AIR FORCE RESERVES AIR COMMANDO Jackie Powell

By Jackie Powell, Col, USAF

When the Air Commando Association contacted me about writing an article in the upcoming "AFSOC Women in the Fight" edition, I hesitated at first. I thought, what do I possibly have to say to the accomplished Air Commandos serving today, and to those who have served in the past, that would be interesting enough for them to want to read? But then I opened up the large scrapbook my mom so affectionately put together of my career in the Air Force and I realized that I accomplished some pretty interesting things, and actually have some good memories of being the first female navigator in every airplane I have flown except the WC-130 Hurricane Hunters. So, if you have a few minutes to read this, I am humbled and honored that you would take the time to be part of my 29 proud years of serving, with the past 18 of those years in AFSOC.

I never planned on having a career in the Air Force, so allow me to frame my story: I graduated from Mather Air Force Base Specialized Undergraduate Navigator Training back in 1990, when life was less complicated and Officer's Clubs were still happening places to blow off steam and build camaraderie! Upon graduation from Nav school, I was assigned to the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) EC-130 mission at Keesler AFB, MS, which had recently opened up to female flyers. Because my unit was deployed to Operation DESERT STORM at the time of my arrival, I had to wait for a C-130 qualification class date at Little Rock AFB to open up. Being a bit anxious to start flying, I took a walk next door to the Air Force Reserve unit to see what their mission was all about. The 403rd Airlift Wing was flying the WC-130 Hurricane Hunter mission, as well as the C-130 tactical airlift mission. When they mentioned they were looking for navigators and asked me to PALACE CHASE in order to fulfill my active duty commitment with the Reserves, I couldn't resist the thought of being dual-qualified in two different aircraft. It sounded so intriguing, especially since they too had just opened their ranks to women. The Air Force released me from Active Duty and I signed a contract to fulfill my 7-year commitment in the Reserves. Twenty-nine years later, and still serving, I guess you could say I had a change of heart and decided to be a career aviator after all!

Now to be honest, after I flew one 13-hour mission with the Hurricane Hunters, into a named storm and into the severe weather the Air Force just taught me not to fly into, I realized I didn't have a 13-hour butt, and wondered if I made the right choice. Luckily, the unit was going through a reorganization where we could no longer be dual-qualified. We would have to pick which mission we wanted to stay with. I chose the tactical airdrop/airland mission over weather reconnaissance. I discovered I had made the right choice because tactical air mobility allowed me to travel the world and to support every hot spot that required mobility airlift.

Being the first female in the "Flying Jennies" of the 815th Airlift Squadron (AS) was interesting, to say the least. Back in 1991, I was flying with pilots who were from the Vietnam era, where smoking was authorized on the aircraft and females were not part of the cockpit crew. I learned early on that in order to succeed in a man's Air Force, I would have to be thick-skinned and be good at my job. And, I tried to be both. When the aircraft commanders used to say, "I'll have Pebbles (my nickname from Nav school) navigate me into combat any day," I knew I had been accepted. After that, it was just being able to roll with the punches and change these Vietnam-era guys' opinions on what females bring to the fight. When they realized I took it, but also gave it right back, I was part of the crew and the "brotherhood." I was no longer seen as the outsider but was an

integral part of the team.

So, I volunteered to deploy to every hotspot, and deploy I did. In 1992, we were sent to Somalia for Operation PROVIDE RELIEF. My first exposure to special operations was when I peeked over the airfield operations center fence and saw a bunch of tents with big burly dudes in shorts eating Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs) and lifting weights. I was told that they were in a career field I'd never see women in. Special ops was for men only. Somewhere I must've put that tidbit of information in my data files, because I decided I was going to be part of that elite group one day.

While flying missions into austere dirt strips with nothing but a couple of local tribesmen directing us where to park once we landed, I realized then and there that I loved the excitement and challenge of the airland and airdrop missions. Successfully finding a remote dirt landing strip in Africa using Omega and Doppler navigation systems and old fashioned dead-reckoning skills, I knew I made the right choice joining the 815th AS. One day in particular I realized all the training the Air Force had invested in me to develop my skills was for a reason. We were one minute out of the dirt strip and on short final when our right external fuel tank was struck by enemy gunfire. Like a well-oiled machine, the crew resource management (CRM) we had learned and practiced came in handy. No one skipped a beat. We ran our emergency checklist and limped the mighty C-130 back home, a two-hour trek with fuel spewing out the right side, one engine shut down, and ominous skies ahead. Upon landing, the crew chief pulled out his earplug, covered up the hole and said we're good to go! Needless to say, that evening CRM took on a whole new meaning as we bonded over an old-fashioned game of "pigs" [a dice game] and a few adult beverages. I was hooked on the air mobility mission, and I admired the great group of guys I was fortunate to fly with. I ended up flying with the 815th AS and supporting air mobility operations across the globe for the next three years.

The nice thing about being in the Reserves was having the ability to control my career. If circumstances changed and you wanted to find another unit to fly with or another location to live, you had the opportunity to make it happen. I decided to move to Fort Lauderdale and interviewed with a unit that had just opened their doors to women, the 301st Rescue Squadron flying HC-130s out of Patrick AFB. I had previously worked for the unit as a civil servant before going to undergraduate navigator training, so I knew the organization and the mission. During my interview, the Chief Navigator said, "Pebbles, we know what we're getting with you. You are one of us. Welcome to the 301st Rescue Squadron." In 1997, the HC-130s and people were transferred to the reactivated 39th RQS.

Rescue was an incredibly satisfying mission. Their motto, "That others may live," was something we lived by. I couldn't have been prouder of the Guardian Angels and the crews who would lay down their life to save a stranger. The camaraderie in that unit was unsurpassed for the three years I was a part of it, that is until I joined Air Force Special Operations Command.

It was my parents who were the ones that put the bug in my ear about AFSOC. My husband and I came to visit them one weekend in 2000 in a place called Bluewater Bay and we immediately fell in love with the Emerald Coast. My parents mentioned we should move here so they could help take care of our 6-month old son. I remember my mom saying, "There are C-130s flying all over this place. You should get a job here." Now, I'm not so sure they don't regret making that recommendation, but that same weekend I interviewed with the 5th SOS, flying MC-130Ps out of Eglin AFB, and with the 711th SOS, flying the MC-130Es out of Duke Field. Both units were hiring, but I chose to fly a mission that seemed to be more challenging than anything I had ever done before.

I had never heard of a terrain following/terrain avoidance (TF/TA) radar and was intrigued by the comments made by some of the pilots in the unit who said, "The TF/TA truly makes this a navigator's airplane." Within three weeks we had moved up to the panhandle of Florida. I was stationed at Duke Field, and my husband was hired as the first Reservist combat controller at the 720th Special Tactics Group.

I had always heard that to be part of AFSOC is to be elite,

the quiet professionals, the best of the best. I was so excited to begin training at Hurlburt Field and be considered a "special operator." Well, I got my opportunity to take part in this elite organization and to make a difference shortly after I completed mission qualification training on the MC-130E Combat Talon. Within a few weeks of being checked out I was mission planning for a local training sortie, when the Supervisor of Flying yelled for everyone to turn on the TV. Our nation was under attack. The United States was at war!

I'll never forget those somber days following the attack. The skies were devoid of aircraft flying—there was no chatter on the radios except from those with military call signs. I got the call from our squadron commander, Lt Col Richard "Beef" Haddad, to come to the squadron immediately. His message was, "Your nation needs you. This is what we have been training for. Who is a volunteer to deploy immediately?" I believe everyone raised their hand that day, but only six crews were selected to deploy that cold October morning. I was fortunate to be among those selected.

I said goodbye to my husband around two o'clock in the morning and then held my 15-month old son one last time. I did not know what would lie ahead, whether I was coming back, and if I was, when was that going to be. I drove to Duke Field shortly thereafter, emotions running wild, excited to "hack" the mission, but sad to leave my baby. Before I knew it, we were gear up, flaps up, and on our way to kick some Taliban butt!

After two days of flying and multiple air refueling, we landed in the Middle East, in an environment that appeared to be somewhere on the moon. In the sweltering desert heat, there was nothing around us but sand and scorpions. We received our in-brief, got some water and MREs, and were then told to make this our home for the next however long we were going to be there.

We had two days to get acclimated before the rock drills started. They had us on lock-down—no calls, no letters home, and no communication outside the compound. Of all the difficult things I had to deal with, not hearing my little boy's voice was the hardest. The rest was a walk in the park—heck we had bathrooms (not much privacy, but they flushed), we had hot showers, and eventually got a chow hall that served steak. Life was good!

Once the rock drills were complete we practiced formation flying, helicopter air refueling, and low-level penetration of hostile airspace. We were ready for "Hit Night." On 19 Oct 2001, AFSOC and USSOCOM brought the fight to the enemy with a huge 5-ship MC-130E formation leading a 14-ship helicopter force filled with US Army special operators. We successfully infiltrated the Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) deep behind enemy lines, and it was broadcast around the world that US SOF had arrived in Osama bin Laden's backyard.

The 711th SOS and our active duty counterpart, the 8th SOS, worked together with incredible teamwork. My aircraft passed 15,000 pounds of fuel to the helicopter assault package at 500 feet. Additionally, my formation loitered for one hour at 250 feet above the ground in denied enemy territory, while avoiding anti-aircraft artillery in the vicinity. This mission was recognized as an extraordinary achievement and we were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC), one of the two DFCs our crew received during our deployment.

Unfortunately, we lost three soldiers during that night, but the loss of those heroes was not in vain. What happened after this mission is a true testament to the dedication and the very fabric of what makes airmen special operators—Air Commandos. The next day we were off the flying schedule, so we went around the bare base finding materials. I was amazed to watch these Air Commandos come back with green felt, plywood, markers, playing cards, poker chips, chairs, hot dogs, popcorn, and sodas to create a makeshift casino out of nothing. That evening the 711th SOS crews opened up a casino and dedicated it in the name of our three fallen soldiers. All the money collected went to the families of those fallen soldiers. I felt so proud to be a part of these quiet professionals.

The second DFC was earned while executing an extremely complicated combat mission. The mission was the first daylight, low-level reconnaissance mission penetrating deep into hostile territory at 100 feet above the ground, undetected, and followed with multiple helicopter air refuelings in conditions which tested the extreme limits of the aircraft and the crew. The citation for the award mentioned that we utilized new technology that had never been used before in any other contingencies, and that accounted for uncharted villages, threats, mountains, and troop movements. In the end we were just doing in combat what we were trained to do. The crew masterfully hacked this mission which culminated in the successful exfiltration of a major political opposition leader considered essential by the US government to the establishment of a post-Taliban representative government.

If you recall, I previously mentioned that when we arrived in the Middle East there was nothing but sand and scorpions. When we weren't flying, we had to find things to help pass the time, and one of those things was to watch scorpion fights. The guys acquired wood and chicken wire and built mini "condos" for the captured scorpions to live in. You can bet I didn't partake in any scorpion capturing—no scorpions, rats, or snakes for me. When we got a few crews together in tent city, we would all look forward to "fight night" and it was actually quite entertaining. Other than that cheap excitement, another favorite past time was movie night. You have to remember we did not have an MWR (Morale, Welfare, and Recreation) facility in the beginning. What we had instead was what we brought with us in the MC-130. Movie night was held in the lanai (four tents put together with a common area for the crews to hang out under canopy when not flying). We hung a large sheet on the side of a tent, and using a laptop and a projector, voila – we had a crude movie theater. What shocked me was that it came with our squadron's popcorn machine. Seemed that one of the crews carted it with them in the aircraft. It was quite the morale booster!

In 2003, after two years of being mobilized to support the Global War on Terrorism the 711th SOS was demobilized, and I decided it was time to apply for a staff tour at AFSOC. I was given the opportunity to be an Individual Mobilization

Augmentee (IMA) at AFSOC Safety. An IMA is a Reservist but is different in that an IMA is assigned directly to an active duty unit or major command instead of a Reserve unit, and the IMA does not work the traditional drilling Reservist sort of schedule. I have been honored and privileged to be part of the Total Force Integration at AFSOC and have worked in various positions to include the 23rd Air Force's 623rd Air Operations Center, and my current position as the Deputy Director of Operations.

I was also fortunate to be chosen by the AFSOC Commander, Lt Gen Wurster, to lead Air Commandos in Africa in June 2010. My duty title was the 27th Expeditionary Special Operations Group (ESOG) commander and I was dual-hatted as the commander of Joint Special Operations Air Component-Africa. For those unfamiliar with the role of a JSOAC, this organization is the air component to the Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) supporting the Global Combatant Commander. Anything related to joint special operations airpower fell squarely under my command, whether Air Force, Army, or contract aircraft.

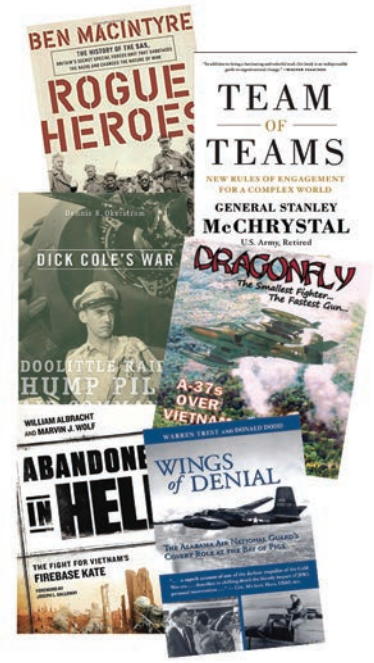
The JSOAC was a relatively new organization to Special Operations Command Africa and I was the fourth commander to lead the Air Commandos throughout the vast continent. When I say vast, that is an understatement. To put the tyranny of distance into perspective, you can fit China, Europe, and the US inside the continent. So, when our aircraft had to fly a mission from the Trans-Sahel (West African Sahara) region across to the eastern side of the continent, it would take about five days.

What was truly amazing to me was the professionalism of our forces, flying non-standard aviation (NSAV) aircraft in Africa. I had new lieutenants and captains flying civilian-like aircraft in civilian clothes into airfields where no one spoke English and there was no US presence. I was fortunate to fly with a U-28 Pilatus crew into an austere field one day. It was amazing to watch the crew whip into action when a man holding a gun greeted our aircraft and wanted to know what we were doing there. The young pilot used his broken French and sign language to say we needed gas. But the man wanted no part of us. After a few minutes of awkward silence, the copilot pulled out a bottle of *Coca-Cola*, and just like in the commercials that simple act broke the language barrier. We got our gas.

This was the beginning of SOF building relationships in places we previously did not have access to. Since those initial days, the SOF footprint in Africa has grown considerably, and our NSAV crews have come a long way in building professional relationships with the locals. I am so proud to have been a part of establishing that relationship early on. I could not have been prouder of our Airmen and was humbled to have had the opportunity to lead these quiet professionals and to receive the trust of the Command to do so.

My retirement is on the horizon, and I can honestly say I am leaving a command that is unique because they uphold the SOF Truths. The most important one being that "humans are more important than hardware." It's the people who get the mission done, and I applaud their dedication and resiliency, day after day, after 17 years of war. But I would be remiss if I didn't give credit to my family who were there to help me succeed throughout my career. Finally, thank you to the Air Commandos of AFSOC for allowing me to be a humble servant by your side for the past 18 years. I have truly enjoyed the ride.

About the Author: Col Jackie Powell currently serves as the Deputy A3 at HQ AFSOC. She is a career Air Force Reservist and has served as a C-130 navigator flying tactical air mobility, combat rescue, and special operations missions. Col Powell, her husband Jeff, and their two sons, Cody and Tyler, reside in Destin, FL.



Looking for the chance to see your name in print?

A book review is often an easy way to try your hand at writing professionally. The *Air Commando Journal* is seeking reviews of books that may be of interest to our readers. If you have an idea for a review, please contact our editors at info@aircommando.org. They will be happy to advise and assist you.

ACA

www.rolls-royce.com/northamerica

Cool under fire.

Rolls-Royce V-22 Infrared Suppressor technology

High reliability plus enhanced performance. Rolls-Royce's infrared suppressor technology turns down the heat. Our technology has been rigorously flight-tested on the V-22 and has been in service on other aircraft for more than a decade, performing well for nearly 200,000 service hours. This battlefield experience proves that you don't have to choose between reliability and performance. With Rolls-Royce, you get both. The design is "plug and play" on all V-22 variants, is in operation on AC-130W aircraft, and design is under way for AC-130J. Rolls-Royce's infrared suppressors provide high reliability with battle-proven performance.

ROLLS ROYCE

Maintenance Officer

Rachel Halvorson

My Air Force journey began with my first "deployment," when I was three months old. My father was an Air Force pilot and in early 1984 he had an exchange assignment flying with the Royal Air Force at RAF Lyneham in the United Kingdom. We were there for three years. My two older sisters attended British schools and by the time we returned to the States, we all had very pronounced British accents. Going from the UK to Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, AL, was quite a culture shock. I distinctly remember going through a fast food stop and not understanding the server's heavy southern drawl. Fortunately, mom was "multi-lingual." Even at that early age, some of my favorite memories are when Dad took me out to the flightline. The aircraft, noise, and general hubbub of flightline operations fascinated me. I knew very early on that I wanted to someday be a part of that.

The frequent moves that come with being an Air Force "brat," in my case eight times before high school, were hard. I often begged my parents to allow me to live with grandparents or an aunt and uncle outside the military. However, looking back, I would not change a thing. It was a key factor in molding and shaping me into the person I am today. Not a lot of people get to travel the world before entering high school.

My family's last move brought us to Hurlburt Field and Ft Walton Beach, FL. My oldest sister had attended Choctawhatchee High School and of course that was my choice as well. It was always a given in my family that my two sisters and I would attend college. My parents gave me choices, either attend a Florida school to take advantage of the Florida Bright Scholars program or my father's alma mater where we could get in-state tuition. I knew I wanted to join the Air Force as an officer, so I applied for an Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) scholarship. I was very fortunate and was selected for a full scholarship. At that point, my parents said I could attend whatever school I desired! I had attended a basketball camp at Auburn University and loved it, so Auburn was an easy choice.

After graduation and commissioning I had no doubt about what I wanted to do in the Air Force. I was not physically qualified to fly, so I listed aircraft maintenance as my first choice of career fields. You can imagine how thrilled I was to be selected for maintenance and even doubly so to learn that I would be assigned to AFSOC. Even during AFROTC, an assignment as an Air Commando was very highly desired by many of my classmates. In January 2007, I attended Air and Space Basic Course (ASBC) at Maxwell AFB. It was very interesting to interact with other brand-new "butter-bars" from every major command and career field.

After I finished ASBC, I returned to Hurlburt and was assigned to the Electronic Warfare (EW) flight of the

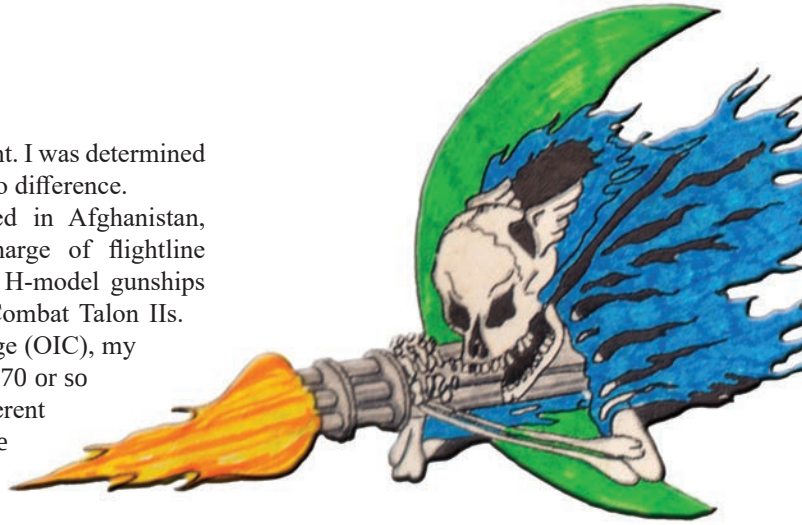
1st Special Operations Component Maintenance Squadron (CMS). First stop after that was to the Aircraft Maintenance Officer Course (AMOC) at Sheppard AFB, TX. I was finally learning about what it takes to be a maintenance officer in the Air Force. I would soon discover that learning about being a maintenance officer in AFSOC was "slightly" different.

I returned to the EW flight for a few months and was then transferred to the 16th Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU) of the 1st Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (SOAMXS). This is where I really started to learn my trade as we supported eight AC-130H Spectre gunships, two of which were constantly deployed with the requisite maintenance teams. I had found my home and tried to learn as much as I could about generating sorties and maintaining these magnificent machines. I quickly learned that the people who truly made "it" happen were the superb senior NCOs who had been servicing these aircraft forever. Some of the NCOs had been working on gunships for decades. I was lucky that they were patient with this young 2Lt who wanted to soak up as much of their experience as possible. I owe all of them a great deal, but especially Kevin Kilgore, Robert Gibbons, Steve White, and Jeff Harding. I couldn't wait until it was my turn to deploy.

That opportunity came after I had been on active duty for only eight months. Another maintenance officer who was scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan was medically disqualified. I volunteered and to my surprise was selected. That was highly unusual for a 2Lt—looking back I suspect my supervisors may have been desperate for a volunteer. In a bit of "being careful what you ask for," I was both extremely excited and nervous about the chance I had been given. I was going to get the opportunity to play a small part in taking the fight to people who had attacked our country.

In December 2007, after mom and dad dropped me off, I went through the deployment line like so many other thousands of young Air Commandos. I was on my way to support Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. It was not until after we were airborne and on our way that I noticed I was the only female maintainer on the flight. I was determined to ensure that made no difference.

When we arrived in Afghanistan, I was placed in charge of flightline maintenance for two H-model gunships and two MC-130H Combat Talon IIs. As the officer in charge (OIC), my goal was to show the 70 or so Airmen across 12 different specialties who were maintaining those aircraft that I was going to be involved in all facets of the job. As it was the dead of winter and the weather was pretty miserable, I also wanted them to know that a major part of my job was to help make their situation as bearable as possible and to look for ways to improve their working and living conditions. Most important to me, I wanted to convey that I wanted to learn from them at the same time. I made it a priority to be outside and on the flightline whenever my people were out there. I was lucky that they "allowed" me to participate in almost all the maintenance activities: engine and propeller changes, brake and tire changes, in-tank fuel maintenance, engine runs, man-on-stand engine runs, preparing antennas on the aircraft for landings in austere airfields, hot refueling (refueling while engines are running), aircraft towing, marshaling the aircraft on blacked out ramps, de-icing operations, and aircraft configuration changes.



All in all, it was a surreal time of my life and I loved every minute of it. However, the seriousness of what we were doing was not lost on me either. In my capacity, I was closely associated with many of the various ground teams that went forward and proudly sent them off on their assigned missions. It was sobering to realize that not all of them would come back.

Not all of our job was conducted in the fairly safe confines of Bagram airfield. I was responsible for assembling maintenance recovery teams (MRTs) that had to go forward to very austere fields to repair broken aircraft on site. I did not want to send my teams off to do something I was not willing to do so I convinced my leadership to allow me to go forward with them. My mom was not thrilled to hear what I had done, but deep down she knew I had to.

That deployment seemed to be over almost as quickly as it had started. I was extremely proud of our maintenance team of professionals who kept the birds flying in some of the most austere conditions imaginable. They were simply amazing. In that short time, I learned more about maintenance, perseverance, and tenacity than I did in the rest of my time on active duty. These folks lived and breathed the SOF ethos of getting the job done when others could not or would not attempt it. Two of our senior NCOs, Steve Hesterman, the production supervisor, and "Doc" Holliday, were key to my team's success. Regrettably, it all came to an end and I returned to the AMU at Hurlburt.

When I returned to Hurlburt I was promoted to OIC of the AMU. It was a very turbulent time as it had been announced that the AC-130H gunships would be transferred to Cannon AFB, NM. It was a tough time to continue to generate training aircraft, support the deployment schedule, and prepare for a unit move to Cannon. Morale was admittedly extremely low, a stark contrast to deployed operations where morale soared. It was easy to see why. Many of the more senior folks and their families had known no other duty station than Hurlburt and were reluctant to leave. Personally, I felt I would be disloyal to all those that had helped me learn the business if I did not go. Therefore, I volunteered to go with my unit to Cannon.

Cannon was a unique challenge for a still relatively inexperienced Lt. Most of the senior maintenance leadership at Cannon were holdovers from the previous Air Combat Command fighter wing. To say there was a different mindset from

what we had experienced at Hurlburt would be an understatement. Many was the time I heard, "You have to get over those Hurbyisms and do it this way."

However, because I was one of the most experienced AFSOC maintenance officers in that initial cadre, I was tapped by the Deputy Maintenance Group Commander to help build AFSOC aircraft generation checklists and other Hurlburt proven concepts. I was also selected to brief the wing commander on all maintenance activities at Cannon in the daily commander's update brief. After one of those briefings to a very important visitor, the wing commander, then Col Stephen Clark, brought CSAF General Norton Schwartz around to say hello to this starry-eyed 1Lt. Gen Schwartz said he had to acknowledge a second-generation Air Commando.

Fortunately, I had established a very good relationship with the 16th SOS leadership at Hurlburt that carried over to Cannon. While we did not always agree, we operated in a realm of mutual respect and trust. The commander, Lt Col Jason "Dutch" Miller treated me as a true teammate with the same goals as the fliers, rather than with the traditional operations versus maintenance adversarial relationship. I owe a lot to Col Miller for that trust, mentoring, and leadership.

Sadly, this nears the end of my AFSOC story. I developed a medical condition that precluded me from deploying and when the Air Force offered an early-out option I took it. I did not want to leave my team and do something else in the Air Force that I knew could not match my experiences as a maintenance Air Commando.

Short of my family, I cannot think of anything that has been more important in my life than my short time as an Air Commando. I always felt that it was an honor to serve with and learn from the elite maintenance teams that did not have "can't" in their vocabulary. Those men and women always found a way to get things done and were continually thinking outside the box. I loved the satisfaction of knowing that how you accomplished your job, especially on the AC-130H, meant giving those on the ground and in harm's way a huge edge and a better chance of survival. It was also an honor to witness some of the most elite and incredible joint forces from across the Services bring the fight to the enemy. It was beyond any words I can articulate to work in an environment that trusted every man and woman on the team to do their part of the mission and do it right. And never, ever was I treated any differently as a woman in a predominantly male career field.

I reflect on my time in AFSOC every day and I miss it so much.

About the Author: Rachel Halvorson is a 2006 graduate of Auburn University and received her commission though Air Force ROTC. She served as a maintenance officer at Hurlburt Field and Cannon AFB, and Bagram AB, Afghanistan primarily working AC-130H gunships. She is married to CMSgt (Ret) Dave Halvorson and is the mother of five-year-old triplet boys.

GUNSHIP Sisterhood

By Meghan Ripple, Lt Col, USAF

SSgt Holly Staup and SrA Lynsay Tomow (All photos courtesy of Lt Col Meghan Ripple)

Lt Col (then) Brenda Cartier and SSgt Holly Staup

Lt Tracey Livengood and Capt Wendy Ruffner

Background photo: Capt Ripple first crew as AC, Mar 2004

"You know we don't have any women here in the 4th SOS."

In late 1999, I was finishing up in flight school at Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi. I cold-called a pilot from the 4th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) to find out what it was like to fly the gunship. After a long chat, his final statement, "You know we don't have any women here in the 4th SOS," seemed more a postscript than a warning. It also belied the service of the women who were already there. When I arrived, five women had flown on Spooky as loadmasters, navigators, fire control officers (FCO), or electronic warfare officers (EWO). Several more had flown as direct support operators, or served as maintainers, flight management, life support, and intelligence professionals. The men who were skeptical of a female copilot had seen incredibly capable women doing jobs that were critical to the mission. Still, it was strange to them that a woman could or would want to do their jobs.

Over the years we've proven that it isn't strange

for women to serve as AC-130 crew members. The stories of the women of the gunship sisterhood taking the fight to the enemy could fill a book. But they would be stories of crew members, not female crew members—ordinary people who were part of extraordinary teams that did amazing things. The possible exception is the work former 16th SOS FCO, Lt Col Wendy Corey did as a Cultural Support Team members. She and others worked with special operations teams on the ground and enhanced the mission specifically because she was female.

Instead, this article focuses on the mostly humorous stories that arose from some poignant questions or statements the gunship sisterhood encountered simply because we are women. There is no intent to besmirch the meritocracy which most of us experienced. Similarly, there is no intent to whitewash the very real frustrations some dealt with. Rather, the intent is to bring to light the stories of the quiet professionals, of both genders, who put the mission first and gradually changed the face of Air Force Special Operations Command.

Capt Woodall, Capt Onufer, and Lt Ortega (All photos courtesy of Lt Col Meghan Ripple)

What do you want us to do with you if something happens?

It was October 2001, and the question came from the EWO and one of the gunners on my first deployment crew. We flew non-stop from Hurlburt Field to Lajes, Azores on October 10th, and with minimum ground time continued onto NAS Rota and NAS Moron, parking three AC-130U Spookies at each location. We expected to have a few days waiting on final diplomatic clearances before pressing on to Southwest Asia and the unit's deployment home for the next 13 months while supporting Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

Due to the huge influx of deploying personnel, NAS Rota was at maximum capacity and most of our crew members were in open-bay barracks. As the only female crew member in the gunship contingent, I had a room in base lodging. I didn't want to leave my room for fear of missing the call telling me where to be next—this was the era of no cell phones on deployment. It meant being away from the crew, though, as we were waiting to go to war and it exacerbated the feeling of being an outsider. Eventually, several of the guys from the three crews dropped by to capitalize on the upside of my separation, access to a television and the opportunity to watch a World Series playoff game

As we sat watching the last innings of the game, the phone in my room rang. It was Lt Col Mike D'Argenio, who I had the immense privilege of having as my aircraft commander during that first deployment. He was also the lead pilot for the six-ship formation of gunships. He told me to send everyone back into crew rest because we were leaving in eight hours. As everyone filtered out, the EWO and gunner hung back just outside my door. Once everyone was gone, they asked, "What do you want us to do with you if we have to bailout?" I figured it was a 'stump the copilot' question. It took a few awkward minutes of me parroting back the planned actions and them saying, "No, not that," for me to realize they were asking because I was a woman. I had not thought about it before. If something happened and we were captured, I would likely be separated from my crew or used against them because of my gender. It was the first time I realized my gender could impact the mission, whether I could do the job or not. They were asking because chivalry wasn't dead and adapting to woman on their crew was one of many unknowns in the days immediately after 9/11.

When I got to our deployment location, I was briefly tent mates with the other 17 females in the AFSOC contingent. In that tent I had the good fortune of meeting Capt Jackie "Pebbles" Powell, an MC-130E Combat Talon navigator and MSgt Rinda Ruppel, an MC-130E radio operator who were great examples of how to get the mission done and minimize the gender differences.

Did they get you your own flight suits?

I asked this question in the note I left for Lt Cheree Kochen on a cot, along with some toiletries and one of the two size 36-short desert flight suits the 4th SOS had in winter 2001. Cheree deployed in the fall of 2001 using her Russian language skills to serve as a translator to help set up AFSOC's northern deployed location. She turned right around and deployed as a copilot that winter. The fact that we had to share flight suits is indicative of the evolution of the supply system to accommodate women in AFSOC flying units.

Some days it felt like pulling teeth trying to get gear that fit and was functional. Many times, female crew members reported getting flight suits that were smaller than the size they had requested and being told "they'll look better on you." But other days, we were humbled by the kindness of life support personnel who took the extra time to modify our survival vests at the shoulders, so they were short enough to fit properly and work the way they were designed.

Why are you here, you don't exactly fit in?

Lt Kim Azaria, a navigator, got this question on the first day of her first deployment with the 4th SOS in 2004. She had deployed immediately after completing initial gunship training and a month later she saved the lives

of a Marine Corps position that came under friendly ground fire in Najaf, Iraq. Her calm voice rang through the confusion, "CEASE FIRE, CEASE FIRE, you are shooting Americans."

By and large, Air Commandos of both genders serve for the same reason, they believe in the mission and the people to their left and right who support that mission. Kim fit in because she was there to protect the friendlies and kill the enemy.

Quiet in the JOC, BASHER is checking in.

In June 2018, I had the privilege of meeting Marine Col (Ret) Willard Buhl. He was the commander of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines during Operation Al Fajr, the battle for the Iraqi city of Fallujah in November 2004. Col Buhl was the presiding officer for a colleague's retirement and beforehand asked me what aircraft I flew. When replied I was an AC-130 gunship pilot, he asked, "Are you BASHER?" I answered that while I had flown using that callsign from July – September of 2004, if there was a female voice on the radio it wasn't me. I explained that our navigators are the primary communicator with the ground force and I was pretty sure he was talking about my initial training classmate, Capt Jenn Woodall. He recalled how he took comfort that Spooky was talking care of his Marines.

There is something powerful about the voice of a woman in a close-air support platform and there are more stories of its impact than we have space to share here. They include the stories of Lt Allison Black, the so called "Angel of Death" over ODA 595 and the Northern Alliance in November 2001. General Dostum, one of the Northern Alliance leaders, is said to have used her presence overhead to taunt his Taliban adversaries. Another is of Lt Stacie Peterson. When she checked in with the ground controller on her first deployed flight, he passed a reconnaissance mission. Her crew was providing overwatch for his special operations team conducting village stability operations. When she called back reporting no activity, he passed her to another patrol team who had another reconnaissance mission. By the end of the night, she had spoken to every friendly position in the village. Her voice, and the power of gunship overhead, provided a feeling of security to a small team in hostile territory. It's about the instinctual feeling of protection: home, mom and apple pie.

She stays with us.

By the summer of 2006 the number of women in the 4th SOS had swelled. We were steadily moving from being 1 percent of the unit (3 of about 300) in 2000, to nearly 10 percent (30 of about 350) in 2009. The influx of women to the unit and changes in US Central Command policy caused a bit of a deployment housing dilemma. While

CAE USA Mission Solutions is a subsidiary of CAE USA and a new business unit eligible to pursue and executive higher-level security programs for the U.S. Department of Defense. We also recently acquired AOCE, which means CAE USA Mission Solutions is now prime contractor supporting the Air Force Special Operations Command Aircrew Training and Rehearsal Support (ATARS) program at Kirtland AFB, Davis-Monthan AFB, Joint Base Andrews, and Moody AFB (KDAM ATARS). CAE is a world-class training systems integrator offering the industry's most comprehensive portfolio of training and simulation solutions designed to enhance safety, efficiency and mission readiness.

cae_usa@caemilusa.com caeusa.com caemsi.com

Your worldwide training partner of choice

CAE

the transition from tents to 'hard billets' was welcome as the war raged into its fifth year, it signaled a change to the camaraderie of 'gunship country.' No more card games on the porches of our tents and females were sometimes separated from the main gunship contingent.

The lead quote for this section is from the current AFSOC Command Chief Master Sergeant, Greg Smith. At the time, he was the senior aerial gunner at the 4th SOS and was the first crew lead gunner that A1C Holly Staup deployed with. Their crew diverted due to bad weather at the primary deployment location in Iraq in the fall of 2006. When they first landed, Holly was assigned to a female tent, separated from her crew,

Capt Ripple Dec 2006 (All photos courtesy of Lt Col Meghan Ripple)

in the middle of a base where hourly indirect fire was part of the battle rhythm. Chief Smith suggested that if she felt comfortable, it made more sense for her to stay with the rest of the crew for accountability and force protection reasons…and so she did because she was part of the crew.

Are you sure you can do it?

This may be one of most frustrating and yet simultaneously understandable questions members of the gunship sisterhood get. Frustrating because who really knows how they will react flying in a combat zone or in a new leadership position. I remember getting asked by a sensor operator, who I deployed with twice as a copilot, if as a woman I could handle being an aircraft commander. He asked while we were walking to the aircraft for a flight during my upgrade training. He didn't ask out of malice, it was part of the unknown of having female crew members, but I thought I had already proved my gender didn't matter to my capability by serving with him in combat. However, the question is also understandable when it comes as part of a first impression. With an average height of about 5 feet 5 inches and weighing in from 110 -150 pounds, it's understandable to say we don't look the part.

There's also a lot to be said for the male leaders who helped show us and everyone else we could do it. On a deployment in 2009, a distinguished visitor saw gunners A1C Jamie Schuler and A1C Elisabeth Grover and asked if they could really upload a full combat load of 105mm rounds. Their lead gunner obliged by giving the pair the opportunity to download everything on the plane and then re-upload the full 100 rounds, each weighing 55 pounds. On the officer side, every pilot knew there would be no quarter given if they were unable to apply the "180 pounds of pedal force" on the rudder required by the flight manual during AC-130 two-engine-out training.

What was harder to test or to show was our mettle. I am forever grateful to the instructor pilots who gave me plenty of chances to succeed in challenging situations. This includes Col D'Argenio trusting me to make the landing into NAS Rota in October 2001 despite minimum visibility and a driving rain storm. At the time, I figured it was just the Group Standardization and Evaluation pilot trying to figure out if I was worthy of being on his crew. I didn't find out until 16 years later it was his way of showing the crew he trusted me.

Members of the gunship sisterhood have done incredible things. We have also failed. Whether or not we can do it is about who we are as people and how hard we work. It is not about our gender.

We can't just go along to get along.

When I left the 4th SOS in 2009, there were women serving in every crew position on the gunship between the 4th and 16th SOS. The 4th SOS had a female commander and the 16th SOS was about to get a female operations officer who would go on to become the commander. I thought we'd reached the point in the sisterhood I always hoped for. Female crew members were just crew members. We could drop the postscript. It took me coming back to the 4th SOS in the summer of 2012 to realize that while we had achieved much and changed a lot of perceptions, sometimes we had done so by "going along to get along." I first heard these words, long distance over the phone during a Wingman Day meeting about sexual assault and harassment in spring 2013. I was deployed, but as the ranking female in the squadron, I had been asked to dial into the women's focus group being held stateside. When women were first joining the unit, we let a lot of inappropriate comments and actions go because we were focused on gaining the credibility necessary to prove we belonged. Unfortunately, in some ways that was interpreted as tacit approval of bad behavior. It took me hearing those words to realize I'd gone along to get along.

In the early days, we all experienced awkward conversations about what the crew wanted to watch on the old VCRs on the aircraft. During the mission, we used them to

record images from our sensors. During long flights back to base we could watch movies on them. On one crew, we watched the whole season of Band of Brothers, one taped episode at a time. But the viewing selections weren't always so appropriate. The digital video recorders the aircraft have today were a welcome change. Primarily because it improved our ability to learn from previous missions due to better image clarity, but also because it ended the conversations about what to watch.

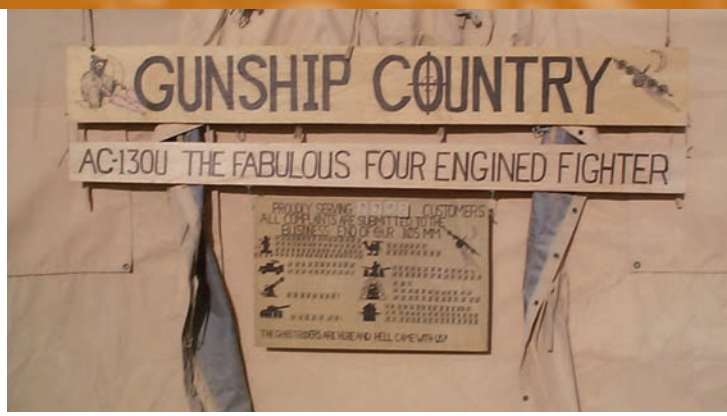
Hindsight showed me that while equality was important, so was speaking up when the gender differences mattered. While we had emerged from the days of the 'G' code on the flight orders to denote a female, we had a significant distance to travel. It meant figuring out practical tools for crews to use in conduct after capture if the senior ranking officer was female and the crew was in a country that values the role of strong men. It meant speaking up when 'traditions' reflected fraternity house culture more than gunship values. It meant figuring out how to adapt to having nursing moms on flights, helping dads use their paternity leave, and welcoming families that didn't fit the traditional mold into our units. It meant including every member of our team, without ever losing sight of the mission.

I don't have females on my crew, I have gunners.

This final quote came from a crew lead aerial gunner in 2010 when he was asked what it was like to have females on his crew. For all the stories above of the differences, for the most part this quote epitomizes what it's been like to serve in the gunship sisterhood. To answer the question of the skeptics from all those years ago, we serve on gunships for the same reason men do. Former AC-130 loadmaster, Crystal Cover, summed it up when she said what she was most proud of as a member of the gunship sisterhood, "I was always just proud to be a small part of something that had such a big impact." I think this quote holds true of every Air Commando, regardless of gender.

In the years since the first woman walked into the 16th SOS to be a Spectre loadmaster to today, we have flown thousands of combat missions. Most of our mentors have been men. Men who saw past our gender and saw us as crew members. Some of our best friends are the men we served with. Our gunship sisters have listened when we didn't feel like anyone else would understand. Our families, from our parents to our partners and our kids have enabled us to serve, given us strength, and dealt with as many awkward and awesome situations as we have. They provide us the inspiration for our service, even when we wonder if we're doing enough as children, siblings, partners, moms, or military professionals. We are proud to be a part of the Air Commando tradition.

About the Author: Lt Col Meghan Ripple is AC-130U pilot and USAF Weapons School graduate with over 4,500 flying hours and over 2,500 hours of combat time. She served in the 4th SOS from 2000-2009 as an evaluator pilot and Assistant Operations Officer. She returned to the 4th SOS in 2012 to serve as the Operations Officer before taking command of the 14th Weapons Squadron. She is currently serving on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon.



SSgt Elizabeth Roedel

SSgt Holly Staup and SrA Jamie Schuler

Lt Col Karen Torraca, Lt Col Tracy Onufer, Maj Ripple, Maj Monk, Maj Ehrler, and Jennifer Bloom in Nov 2010.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

By Kate Hewlett, Capt, USAF

Capt Hewlett in front of MC-130J Commando II at Cowboy Aviation, home of the University of Wyoming, picking up AFROTC cadets for a familiarization flight and site visit to Cannon AFB, NM. (All photos courtesy of Capt Kate Hewlett)

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference....

— *Robert Frost*

In my case, Robert Frost's poem is a massive understatement. When people ask me about my path to where I am today, I always have to ask how much time they have. I have always known where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do with my life, but the path to reach that goal and those who have helped me along the way has been the most surprising and rewarding part of my career.

From a very young age, I knew I wanted to serve in the military and knew I wanted to fly. My dad served in Vietnam and as long as I can remember, his service was my main driving force for what I wanted to do with my life. Service was always what I was meant to do and service through aviation quickly became the only option for me.

My dad was a trains, planes, and automobiles kind of guy and he raised his daughter very much in that image. We worked on model trains together, went to car shows, and most importantly, he took me to every airshow we possibly could attend. I vividly remember watching the Thunderbirds and Blue Angles screaming through the air and knowing I simply had to find a way to fly. That dream became more realistic to me when I saw acts like Patty Wagstaff, a female aerobatic pilot whose skill rivaled and surpassed those of the male performers. In her, I saw not only that women could be pilots, but they could be the absolute best.

Accepting barriers based on gender was never an option to me

and I credit that directly to my parents who always encouraged my dreams and never limited anything I wanted to do. The most pivotal example of this was the best Christmas present I have ever received—flying lessons. I took my very first flying lesson when I was in the 7th grade. I stepped off that first flight where my parents met me at the plane, walked up to them with resolve and told them, "I will have you know, we will be doing this again." To this day, any time my parents talk about how proud they are of my career, I always remind them, it's all their fault.

In college, I joined Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) and I dove headfirst into all things military. AFROTC was the obvious path to a commission and becoming a pilot, but I make plans and God laughs…I met a boy. Mike was the cadet wing commander of our AFROTC detachment and we fell in love fast. The universe has quite the sense of fate because we fell in love during a base visit to Eglin AFB and Hurlburt Field. The Emerald Coast was also where we were first introduced to the AFSOC mission, where we took our honeymoon, and where we would later be stationed. He had the same aspirations and goals as me, but God had His own plan for our journeys to get there.

Halfway through his senior year of college, Mike ran out of money to finish college. Because he had contracted with AFROTC, he had two options. Option One was to pay back any scholarship money he had received and not go into the Air Force. Option Two was to enlist for two years. The only possible choice for us was for him to enlist and keep the option open of becoming officers one day. So, Mike enlisted in the summer of 2003. We were married in the fall of that year and we moved to Little Rock, AR. That was detour number one.

My first lesson into the well-known Air Force adage, "every assignment is what you make of it," was at Little Rock AFB. With my path to commissioning seemingly derailed, I made myself fairly miserable for the first year of our assignment there. I realized for the first time what is was like to be a military spouse and had a very hard time adapting to the notion that my whole identity was based off of my husband and his career. I cannot imagine a more challenging, self-sacrificing, often thankless, and critical role in the military. I will always be grateful for the intense appreciation I now have for what it means to be a military spouse. While I learned that every assignment is what you make of it, I also started to learn that unplanned paths and detours can be the most rewarding.

After Mike's enlistment was up, we returned to college with the intention of getting back on what we thought was our path to finish our degrees and earning our commissions, but because of changes to the AFROTC program, it made more sense to finish our degrees and pursue commissioning through Officer Training School (OTS). That was detour number two.

We graduated from college in 2008 and started the laborious task of applying for OTS approximately eight months prior to graduation. Little did we know just how long and difficult this process would be. Again, not one to easily accept no, I pushed to complete our applications and we waited. Then the phone call came. Our recruiter only had good news for Mike. He was picked up for a pilot slot and I was a non-select. Devastation does not quite fully encompass what I felt at that moment and in the following months. I watched my dream of being an officer and a pilot in the Air Force slip away. My entire life I had dreamed of serving and now the Air Force was saying it didn't want me. Now what? Detour number three.

Mike went to OTS in the spring of 2009. I arrived in Montgomery, AL, that summer for his graduation festivities and put on as brave a face as I could muster. Still, being at Maxwell AFB and desperately wanting to be an officer candidate myself was very much salt in an open wound.

Oddly, our recruiter had been calling Mike all that week, but he didn't leave messages as to why. My application had automatically rolled over to the next board, but they were all the same scores from the previous board, so I had no expectation of being accepted. On the night of Mike's OTS Dining Out, I had just gotten my hair done and was on my way back up to my hotel room to get dressed when our recruiter finally called me. I told him, "Look, if you don't have good news, I really don't need to hear that OTS doesn't want me while I am here at OTS." He asked me what I would consider as good news and I said, "Well, that I got selected." He said "Congratulations… you are going to be a Combat Systems Officer (CSO)," to

Kate Hewlett at age 12, just after her very first flying lesson, a Christmas gift from her parents that started it all.

which I replied, "What is that?" The recruiter informed me that CSO was the new term for a navigator and I suddenly realized I had been selected to be an Air Force officer and an aviator. I immediate burst into tears--my dream was finally within my reach. Mike and my friends heard me crying so hard that they thought someone had died. My recruiter thought I was crying because I had received a CSO slot rather than a pilot slot (detour number four, and my absolute favorite one), but I could not possibly have been happier.

In the spring of 2010, I started OTS. I came ready to crush the training, but a few days into training I was injured and spent 7 of my 13 weeks on crutches. Another detour. Luckily for me, Capt Michael Manning was my flight commander. He

Flying the MC-130J Commando II over the mountains of Colorado.

Hanging out on the ramp of an MC-130P during a low-level flight over Kitty Hawk. (All photos courtesy of Capt Kate Hewlett)

believed in me and fought to keep me in training. He allowed me every last chance to heal and pass the required physical fitness test, which I did just before graduation, with him and my entire flight running by my side. I know I would have never achieved any of my dreams had it not been for now Lt Col Manning's support and who, to this day, remains my dearest friend, constant mentor, and the example of what every leader should strive to become.

I reported to NAS Pensacola for CSO training in June of 2010. During my initial T-6 phase of training, Mike was completing his pilot training at Vance AFB. He received his drop list (aircraft assignment choices) weeks before I completed the T-6 phase of CSO training and well before I had enough training to really know what I wanted to fly. Like every newbie, I thought I wanted fighters, so when Mike's drop list came out, we tried to pick planes that might be stationed relatively close to an F-15E Strike Eagle base.

We had discussed him selecting C-130s as they held a very special place in our hearts from our years at Little Rock, but Mike was seriously considering AFSOC. At the time I was unsure if what we thought was the operations tempo and lifestyle of AFSOC would be conducive to what we wanted for our marriage. I was very torn about Mike's selection, so I went to my flight commander, Maj Richard "Pyle" Wilson, a prior C-130 navigator, turned A-10 pilot, now T-6 instructor pilot. He said, "Kate, you want a sexy mission, not a sexy airplane." He explained that flying in the Air Force was about the mission, who you support, and the difference you make. That advice and his insight meant that AFSOC was the only way to go. Detour number six.

Based on Maj Wilson's advice, Mike placed AFSOC C-130s at the top of his list. On drop night, Mike received an MC-130P Combat Shadow to Eglin AFB. During the remainder of CSO training, I was amazed to discover that all the mission sets I excelled in or loved were those of the Shadow—radar navigation and the self-protection parts of electronic warfare.

There are no guarantees for military couples coming out of initial qualification training, but again I was fortunate to have a flight commander, Maj Matthew Mazzarello who believed in me and fought to get me the same aircraft as my husband. I knew nothing was going to be a given, so I worked hard make the decision easy for the powers that be. On drop night, there was so much on the line I could barely walk up to the stage. With my back to the screen, the possible assignments flashed by and when they stopped, my fate was revealed…I would be joining AFSOC as an MC-130P navigator.

My career in AFSOC began in the Combat Shadow at the 9th Special Operations Squadron (SOS). Maj Wilson's insight was completely accurate about loving the mission. The greatest part about being an MC-130P aviator was the multi-role aspect. On any given night we could be tanking off a KC-135, descending into a mountainous terrain for low-level NVG navigation, conducting an airdrop, refueling a CV-22 Osprey, and then landing on a dirt airfield to infiltrate a special operations team. And those were only some of the mission sets the Combat Shadow could perform. It was always something new and always something different, and my gender rarely mattered.

It was while on deployment I truly learned what working with those elite operators of the Air Force and our sister Services really means. It is a family. A brotherhood and sisterhood. These are some of the toughest, scariest, and manliest fighters in our military and I never once felt like an outsider or a girl who didn't belong. They were always happy to tell me about their wives, show me pictures of their kids, let me play with the working dogs, and the most fun, play with their "toys." I remember a "show and tell" day where they brought out all their weapons and equipment for us to check out. I was extremely impressed with their arsenal of weapons…much more impressive than my USAF-issued M-9 pistol.

On one mission, I was highly entertained with just how inadequate my personal firearm was. We were transporting a SOF team and their unhappy guests. As the right navigator on that mission, I was serving as safety observer while we loaded. There I was, surrounded by men who did not appreciate being in the situation they were and who most certainly did not appreciate a female in their presence watching them. I stood in the back of my plane, my hand on my trusty 9mm, with the

most serious 'don't try anything' face, and could not help but think of how ridiculous I must have seemed to that US SOF team there and their impressive firearms, compared to me and my 9mm.

Some of these long missions came with serious drawbacks for female fliers. As much as I adored my Combat Shadow, it was not designed with female crewmembers in mind. For example, there are two urinals on the aircraft and privacy was lacking for anyone, of any gender, who used them. Although there are commercial products available to help in these situations, I always felt very awkward standing to pee with a device and surrounded by men, so my method of choice was always 'tactical dehydration.' My record was 12.5 hours.

If I could have stayed a navigator on the Combat Shadow my entire career, I absolutely would have. I adored everything about the mission of a Shadow nav, but detour number seven arrived when it was announced the MC-130P would be retired in 2015. It now felt like it was time to continue towards the goal I had had since I was a little girl, so I applied for and was accepted into pilot training.

Retiring the Combat Shadow was immensely bittersweet. The history and heritage of her storied legacy is deeply rooted in my heart to this day and I am excessively grateful I had the privilege to be a small part of her service to this nation. I also had the privilege of being the very last mission navigator of the Special Operations MC-130P. On 2 Jun 2015, we taxied our final two girls for input into the Boneyard and their final resting place. I was the mission navigator on tail 0217, the last AFSOC Shadow to be retired. It was a humbling and poignant moment saying goodbye. On that trip, we had the honor of a legend of the community accompanying us on the final flight. Col (Ret) John Cline said a very sweet goodbye to 0217. He reached up, placed his hand on her side, and said, "Goodbye my friend. I'm sorry I could not bring your sister home." Col Cline had been the aircraft commander on the Ditka 03 crash (see *ACJ*, Vol 4, Issue 2 and Vol 5, Issue 2), tail 0213, and was an absolute hero in my eyes. We became fast friends on the trip and remain close to this day. He seemed truly excited about my selection to pilot training, my passion for AFSOC, and my desire to return to the community as a pilot. I gained another priceless mentor and champion on that day.

I left for pilot training in the fall of 2015. After a grueling 13 months, it was once more time for drop night and everything was riding on my assignment. Mike had retrained into the MC-130J and was stationed at RAF Mildenhall in the UK. We had already spent a significant amount of time apart and the thought of not being in AFSOC and the MC-130J was absolutely sickening. I knew I had done well in my class, but as always, nothing is guaranteed. There were only two AFSOC aircraft on our list and I unfortunately I had done an excellent job of advocating for the command. Half my class wanted AFSOC. There I was again, with my back to the screen, my possible futures flashing away, and then the slides stopped…I would be re-joining AFSOC as an MC-130J pilot and returning to my beloved 9th SOS, this time at Cannon AFB.

When all of your dreams come true, rarely are you surrounded by nearly all of your loved ones. On the day I received my pilot wings, though, the majority of my family, friends, mentors, and my husband were there to see me realize my dream.

I know that my path has been an unusual one, but I also know that path brought me here. I know that so many people have been driving forces in my life from my family to my mentors, my friends, and Mike. The examples set by female pioneers in AFSOC like Brig Gen (Sel) Brenda Cartier, Col Shelley Rodriguez, Col (Ret) Christina Willard, Lt Col Heather Demis, have shone like a beacon to me, leading the way. I know I am standing on the shoulders of giants and none of my dreams would have happened without these people and without their examples. I can only hope to one day serve as a similar example for other little girls looking up to the sky and dreaming of their future.

The crew on the tail of 66-0217, after imputing the last MC-130P into AMARG. Col Cline is to left of me.

Though I always knew I wanted to be an officer and a pilot in the Air Force, I could have never predicted all the twist and turns my journey would take. On my unusual path to becoming an MC-130J pilot, I gained lifelong friends, incredible mentors, and an enduring passion for the special operations mission. It took me nearly 25 years of dreaming and striving, and more detours than I could have imagined, but I am now living my wildest dreams as an Air Commando.

Without a doubt, I took the road less traveled…and it has made all the difference.

About the Author: Capt Kate Hewlett is the flight commander for the Command Support Flight at the 9th SOS at Cannon AFB, NM. She is an MC-130J Commando II pilot and prior MC-130P Combat Shadow navigator with over 1,000 flight hours including deployments supporting Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Originally from St Louis, MO, she graduated from the University of Missouri with degrees in Psychology and Women's and Gender Studies in 2008. She commissioned through Air Force Officer Training School in 2010, earned her Combat Systems Officer wings from NAS Pensacola in 2012, and received her pilot wings at Columbus AFB in 2016.

Kristina Montgomery

Air Commando

Col Palenske (top row, sixth from the left) **and CMSgt Kristina Montgomery** (top row, fourth from the left) **with J-Staff** (All photos courtesy of CMSgt Montgomery)

They didn't care who I was or where I was from, they only cared that I executed my duties to the best of my ability. They cared that I didn't get caught up in the black and white and that I did what I could to figure things out. They cared that I was a problem-solver and a critical thinker, but also that I understood my left and right limits. They cared that I knew when to ask for help.

"They" were Air Commandos, and although I grew up in the same house as one, I never really understood what "they" stood for.

As a child of an AC-130H Spectre gunner and flight engineer, I knew Air Commandos were different and received specialized training. I also knew they were a small percentage of the Air Force. With a dad who flew on gunships, we were lucky to spend most of my childhood at Hurlburt Field and in the surrounding areas. I grew up on Blackjack Circle in Poquito Bayou, attended Longwood Elementary and graduated from Niceville Senior High. Throughout my childhood, I remember my dad being gone often and I never knew any different. He didn't talk about his absence and many times "goodbyes" consisted of a hug, a kiss, and a whispered "see ya later" in the middle of the night. I never knew when or where he was going and as a family we understood. There was, however, one exception I vividly remember. It was the day before he left for Operation DESERT STORM. He sat us down and had a conversation about why he was leaving and that he didn't know when he would return. At the time, I didn't understand why this day was any different from others or why he was a bit emotional about it. Knowing what I know now, I completely understand.

I came in the Air Force as a personnelist and during my second enlistment I had a hard time finding meaning in my service…my "why." I loved the Air Force and being a personnelist, but I had become comfortable. I wanted to be uncomfortable, to be challenged. I know seeking discomfort sounds odd and not many people do it, but most of us have a habit of getting comfortable in our routines and patterns. This is the "rut" that is often so difficult to get out of. I yearned to be uncomfortable because I believed it to be the only environment where sustained or exponential growth can occur. To that end, I had decided to separate after my commitment. I received orders to HQ AFSOC, though, and unbeknownst to me, that assignment would change my mind and change my life.

Walking into the AFSOC headquarters building I was intrigued and drawn to the history laid out on the walls. So much so, that I usually dedicated the first hour of my mornings to walking the hallways. Over time I read every story. Looking at the Wall of Fame, some fallen, I stared into their eyes. It was then that I recognized my "why." I thought, "How selfish could I be?" These heroes paid the ultimate sacrifice for me to stand there, and for me to be comfortable in a pattern and routine. Although I knew I could never repay them, I would honor them and affirm in my life the opportunity they had given me. And, I wouldn't take it for granted.

As I started working at the headquarters, I was indoctrinated into the strategic mindset of the mission and what it means to be an Air Commando. I quickly understood that Air Commandos trusted each other to accomplish the mission and didn't care who you were or where you were from, they just cared that you got it done. I felt empowered and uncomfortable. I felt challenged. I acquired a greater sense of what was consequential to the defense of the nation, and that it would be done at any cost. With that understanding, I took my work as a personnelist to a higher level.

Fast forwarding a couple of years, after a 365-day deployment to Afghanistan and a short time at Lackland AFB, TX, I excitedly found myself back at Hurlburt, assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) Force Support Squadron as the Military Personnel Flight Superintendent. During this time, the 1st SOW had recently taken command and control (C2) of the Combined Joint Special Operations Air Component – Afghanistan (CJSOAC-A). The 1st SOW command team planned on deploying early to CJSOAC-A to ensure a smooth transition of C2 and to make sure they were doing all they could to take care of the joint force supporting downrange special air operations.

After being selected for promotion to Chief Master Sergeant, I received a call from the wing Command Chief with a deployment opportunity. The deployment was to be the J1 (Personnel) Superintendent for CJSOAC-A. I didn't hesitate and said "yes" before he was able to finish his sentence. At that point, I had been in AFSOC for almost eight years and was more than ready for my first AFSOC deployment.

In the midst of preparing for the deployment, the wing Command Chief was selected for reassignment, subsequently leaving the deployed senior enlisted leader (Sel) position vacant. The wing commander decided I would deploy as his SEL. I was honored that he trusted me to do the job and I was up for the challenge. Sure, the thought of being deployed to an SEL position typically filled by an operational Chief when I was only a Chief (Sel) and a career personnelist clouded my mind. But I accepted that discomfort and used it as a platform for action to nullify any perceived inadequacies I thought I might have given my non-operational background. I knew all

IT'S A CULTURE

By Kristina Montgomery, CMSgt, USAF

that AFSOC cared about is that you are good at what you do. They needed me to be competent and put forth the work. With that, I became laser-focused on becoming more operationally sound and ready to lead the force. Surrounding me was a team of Airmen, NCOs, and senior leaders who were willing, regardless of my background, to set me up for success.

In the months leading up to the deployment, I spent time within the operations squadrons (both Talons and Gunships), Special Tactics, and the Maintenance Group, learning their missions and what their specific needs would be downrange. Additionally, a great Chief and mentor who equipped me with the skills to be a good leader brought me up to speed on the missions of our sister Services as well as the Afghan partner forces. The CJSOAC-A provided joint airpower for the special operations ground forces. The ground forces included Air Force Special Tactics, Army Special Forces and Rangers, coalition, and Afghan partner forces, like their commandos. Becoming familiar with all these different organizations' "languages" and operations would be vital to mission success.

CMSgt Kristina Montgomery on the back of a MH 47.
(All photos courtesy of CMSgt Montgomery)

There I was Day One, boots on the ground in Afghanistan, standing next to the CJSOAC-A commander at the commanders update brief (CUB) in the joint operations center (JOC). As each squadron commander and staff director provided their updates I listened intently. Being there in front of those great Americans, hearing the outcomes of the previous night's missions, the ingenuity of our maintenance personnel, and what missions were to be conducted within the next couple hours, was what dreams are made of. Well, at least my dreams. I physically felt a sense of pride running through me, and I knew I was where I was meant to be.

As the SEL, the CJSOAC-A team relied on me to translate the mission and necessities to our higher headquarters and mission partners. How could I possibly do that if they were not confident in my abilities? I immediately went to work spending time in the JOC and with the squadrons, seeing the mission being accomplished first-hand, almost becoming a part of them, and fluent in all things from "air to the ground." In turn, I believe I gained their confidence and respect. Additionally, I made efforts to reach out to our mission partner SELs. It was important they knew who I was, how CJSOAC-A could support them, and what support we needed from them.

Relationships are important. Building the relationship with the mission partner SELs, from the Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF), the Special Forces and Rangers, the Afghan Special Mission Wing, the Afghan Special Operations Command, and the General Command Police Special Unit proved to be invaluable to the mission and the morale of the team. Headed by the SOJTF Command Sergeant Major, we met weekly, sometimes more often, to discuss missions and any issues or highlights from the week. I was the only female but that didn't faze them. I attribute that to the confidence, abilities, and willingness I brought to the table. As a joint and combined SEL team we positively influenced outcomes and resolved specific issues affecting the mission.

Taking care of Airmen is what Air Force leaders do. At CJSOAC-A we knew that most of the Airmen would return on a rotational basis and we wanted them to look forward to returning. For this reason, morale was important to us and the commander and I focused on making the lives of the team better while they were there. We gathered feedback and started addressing each request one at a time. With the help of the 1st SOW back at Hurlburt we managed to get new gym equipment and furniture for our maintenance personnel. Their job required they be at the ready all day every day which didn't allow them to leave the hangar. We focused on the human dimension of special operations air power, and this drove us to fix the things that prevented mission focus and human performance.

You see, it doesn't matter who you are or where you are from. It only matters that you execute your duties to the best of your ability, that you don't get caught up in what you don't know, and you put in the effort to learn what you need to know. You cannot worry about what sets you apart, but instead need to concentrate on solving problems, knowing your limits, and knowing when to ask for backup.

SOF is not about a tab, a beret, or a title. It is about a mindset and a culture that expects you to think about the larger strategic implications of tactical actions. As a female, it became immediately apparent to me that the guys didn't care about my gender. What they cared about was my ability. They taught me, they supported me, and they accepted me. This is what makes SOF a family…its culture.

Our nation asks incredible sacrifice from its Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. The 2018 National Defense Strategy lays out 11 Department of Defense objectives, an operational approach, and three operational "ways" to achieve our nation's "ends." The "means" are and will continue to be our people. What matters is that you take care of the people, because at the end of the day, the people take care of the mission.

Footnote: CMSgt Greg Smith, AFSOC Command Chief

As the Command Chief for AFSOC, I spend a lot of time aligning our senior enlisted leaders for deployments. It is all about placing the right leader in the right place at the right time. With 12 deployments throughout my career in AFSOC, I had a pretty good feel for which Chiefs "get it" and I worked hard to match talent to capability.

Taken with an MC130J crew after a mission. CMSgt Montgomery is shown on the left of bottom row.

It was early summer 2017 and Col Tom Palenske called me to discuss his choice for the upcoming 1st SOW deployment. His Command Chief had just received an assignment and he needed an Air Commando command team partner. He said, "Chief, I want to bring Kristina Montgomery with me."

He started to explain his reasons and I stopped him right there. "Sir, Kris is a perfect choice for you," I replied. You see, there are certain intangibles that can't be created. Situational awareness, self-motivation, drive, and a willingness to push beyond what is possible are key character attributes I would use to describe her, so when Col Palenske made his selection, I was on board.

Kris and I spent a lot of time discussing the strategic landscape of Afghanistan. The Islamic State (ISIS-K) was attempting to gain inroads, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups were festering, and we were pushing the fight harder and faster following the recently released South Asia Strategy. Kristina and I covered Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan's (SOJTF-A) command structure, the role of the CJSOAC-A, and the development of the Afghan Special Operations Command. She took a ton of notes and had even more questions. Throughout it all, she continued to reply "got it" and seemed to instantly process and absorb the material. Her questions focused on what the team needed and how she could remove barriers to mission accomplishment.

Kris deployed with the command team and established communication as soon as she arrived. She spent the first week or so doing a terrain walk and meeting all of the key players on the ground. Within a few weeks, she was firmly entrenched and running ops. The SOJTF-A Command Sergeant Major, a longtime Special Forces leader and good friend of mine, called to tell me how well she was doing. He was very impressed with her ability to translate mission command and move out.

Over the next several months, the questions became fewer and fewer as Chief Montgomery mastered every aspect of leading a special operations force during conflict. Her tenacity and drive to constantly learn everything, from in-processing and beddown, operations, intelligence cycles, ammunition expenditure and cargo movement, communications requirements at the forward operating locations, and fuel and passenger movement, culminated during several large operations. We were pushing SOF teams throughout the region and there were a lot of moving parts. Kris knew every intelligence, operational, logistical, and communication detail, while also tracking where everyone was. She was advising the commander and fully integrated into the senior enlisted leader network. She was accepted by all as a key member of the team.

Leadership is gender neutral, it is color blind, and doesn't care where you're from or what you do. Being a great leader is about recognizing the team of Air Commandos that do the impossible every day. It is about tirelessly working to make sure they have what they need so our nation and our command can do what it does. Over the course of almost six months, I was continually amazed by how well the entire team performed. Col Tom Palenske and CMSgt Kris Montgomery were a great Command Team and enabled that success.

About the Author: CMSgt Kristina Bricker Montgomery serves as the Chief Enlisted Manager of Manpower, Personnel and Services, HQ AFSOC. Chief Montgomery enlisted in the Air Force in 1998. Her background includes various personnel duties at the squadron and major-command levels as well as multiple deployments in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, the International Security Assistance Force/Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan as well as the Combined Joint Special Operations Air Component Afghanistan for Operation FREEDOM'S SENTINAL and Operation RESOLUTE SUPPORT.

Remembering Anissa Shero

Air Commando

By Paul Harmon, Col, USAF (Ret)

SSgt Anissa Shero was born 5 Oct 1970, in Grafton, WV. She graduated from Grafton High School in 1988. After graduation she worked with a local radio station, WTBZ, in Grafton and attended Fairmont State College. In 1992, she enlisted in the Air Force and after graduating basic military training at Lackland AFB, TX, she went to Sheppard AFB, TX, for the Aircraft Loadmaster Course (ALC). After ALC she moved to Little Rock AFB, AR, for C-130 loadmaster qualification training and in November 1992, was assigned to the 50th Airlift Squadron (AS). After three years of flying with the 50th AS, she transferred to Air Mobility Command's C-130 Weapons Instructor Detachment, also at Little Rock AFB, serving there until August 2001. Her next assignment was to the 15th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) at Hurlburt Field, FL. After completing MC-130H mission qualification at Kirtland AFB, NM, she joined the 15th SOS as a Combat Talon II loadmaster.

After becoming fully acquainted with her new squadron she was ready to deploy for post-9/11 combat operations supporting Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. In June 2002, SSgt Shero and TSgt Sean Corlew were the loadmasters on Chariot 55, flying a mission to exfiltrate a three-person US Special Forces (SF) team from the village of Sardeh Band, Afghanistan. Sardeh Band is located approximately 35 miles south of city of Gardez and has a 6,850 foot gravel airstrip.

After the Combat Talon landed and rolled out on the dusty landing zone, the aircraft commander directed an engine-running on-load of the team. The loadmasters lowered the ramp and guided the SF team, with their vehicle and trailer loaded with several thousand pounds of equipment, onto the

MC-130. After the vehicle and equipment were secured, Chariot 55 attempted a maximum effort takeoff toward the southwest, the opposite direction of landing to take advantage of the lower terrain. The winds were light and variable, but because the Sardeh Band airstrip was nearly 7,000 feet above mean sea level and had several soft sandy sections, the MC-130 did not accelerate as quickly as needed. The pilot aborted the takeoff.

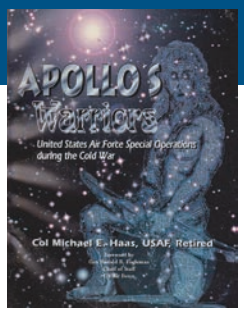
Rolling out at the opposite end of the airstrip the aircraft commander repositioned Chariot 55 for a second attempt to depart, this time to the northeast, the same direction as he had landed. While the pilot was turning the aircraft around, SSgt Shero made a walk-through of the cargo compartment ensuring the vehicle, equipment, and soldiers were still secured. Two of the soldiers were sitting in their vehicle unrestrained. As she walked past them she told them they had better buckle in tightly for the next takeoff attempt because it might be a rough one.

Shortly after, Chariot 55 began its second attempt to takeoff. This time, the C-130 lifted off at the planned minimum rotation speed but was unable to continue its acceleration. In fact, Chariot 55 began to lose airspeed. Despite the cockpit crew's best efforts to get the aircraft turned toward lower terrain, Chariot 55 crashed in a hilly area some 2.5 miles from the landing strip. SSgt Shero, TSgt Corlew, and Army Sergeant First Class Peter Tycz, perished in the crash. The pilots, navigator, electronic warfare officer, flight engineer on the flight deck, and the two soldiers Shero had spoken to made it out of the wreckage with non-life threatening injuries. The survivors were rescued some time later by a NATO ground force. At 31 years old, SSgt Anissa Shero was the first Air Force woman to die in Afghanistan.

In February 2008, SSgt Anissa Shero and her fellow loadmaster, TSgt Sean Corlew, were memorialized for their sacrifice and their memory has been permanently etched into Air Commando heritage. The 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) commander renamed two streets on Hurlburt Field in their honor; Shero Circle and Corlew Road. During the dedication ceremony the 15th SOS commander at the time, Lt Col Tony Bauernfeind said, "We're here to remember their dedication, their professionalism, their warrior spirit, their honored place in our heritage and ultimately why we exist as a military today -- to protect our nation, and if called upon, to lay our lives down for the cause." CMSgt (Ret) Richard "Taco" Sanchez, a former 1st SOW Command Chief and Combat Talon loadmaster, also praised the two NCOs and fellow loadmasters. Of SSgt Shero, Chief Sanchez said, "Anissa knew her job, and she did it well and because of what she did, two of those Special Forces soldiers survived."

During her 10-year career SSgt Shero earned the Air Medal, Aerial Achievement Medal, and the Air Force Commendation Medal with oak leaf cluster. She was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery; Section 66, Site 6990.

About the Author: Col Paul Harmon retired from the Air Force in 2010 after 30 years of service. During his career Col Harmon held several command positions in operations and training, and also served as the Director, Special Operations Liaison Element in the Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM.



Book Review

By Patricia Blocksome, PhD

Apollo's Warriors: United States Air Force Special Operations during the Cold War

By Michael E. Haas, Col, USAF (Ret) Air University Press, 1997, 369 pages

Apollo's Warriors: United States Air Force Special Operations during the Cold War provides a fascinating overview of the different roles and operations that US Air Force Special Operations Forces (USAF SOF) carried out from 1950 to 1968. This book, written by Colonel Michael E. Haas (USAF, retired), offers an excellent introduction to the broad variety of missions, airframes, and dilemmas within air forces' special operations. The book, which is written as a series of historical vignettes that describe specific operations, does not delve deeply into the specific details of any operation or the strategic context in which those operations occurred. Instead, the strength of the book lies in its development of overarching themes that help to understand when, where, why, and how air force special operations and forces are developed and deployed. While this book, published in 1997, does not provide information on operations later than the Vietnam War, it is still relevant today, especially given that several chapters address contemporary operational challenges, such as operations in North Korea, as well as covert and psychological operations directed against hostile superpowers.

The book opens with a brief prologue describing operations in Europe and the China-Burma-India theater during World War II, and then transitions into the three main sections of the book, which cover operations in the Korean War, covert operations around the globe during the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, respectively. The chapters within each section focus on specific units and missions; this organization provides a coherent discussion of the evolution of each mission from beginning to end. However, the chapters overlap each other chronologically when multiple separate USAF SOF missions were occurring simultaneously. This can make placing all of the different operations into a larger, more comprehensive view of how air force special operations as a whole were developing throughout a given period somewhat difficult for the reader. This is a minor issue, however, when placed against the book's outstanding contribution to describing the incredible diversity of operations required of USAF SOF, and the impressive creativity, flexibility, and determination these units brought to achieve what was required.

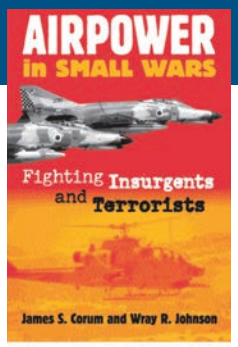
While the book does explicitly provide a summary of the themes of air force special operations throughout the Cold War, there are two topics that recur frequently throughout its pages. The first of these is the cycle by which USAF SOF becomes a necessary component to achieve military and political aims, operates in high-demand, and then, as the context changes, is viewed as unnecessary. The second is the absolute requirement for adaptability based on the demands of the operating environment. This adaptability encompasses everything from aircraft procurement, the nationality and training of the aircrews, the demands of the terrain, and the deniability of the mission.

In describing the ebb and flow of political support and military funding to air force special operations, Col Haas notes that the sustenance of both operations and forces follows a predictable cycle. Given a crisis, there is an immediate, strong demand for air forces capable of such operations. Funding becomes available, flexibility in terms of tactics, procedures, and airframes becomes acceptable, and political support for unorthodox missions becomes more easily acquired. As time passes, however, and the crisis fades, a drawdown occurs. While this drawdown cycle is experienced by the US military as a whole after the end of every crisis and conflict, such drawdowns were quite extreme for USAF SOF; pertinent units were deactivated entirely, or switched from active duty to Guard units. These severe reductions led to a loss of experience and readiness, which proved a handicap when, apparently inevitably, a new crisis occurred and demand for USAF SOF capabilities spiked once again.

Beyond drawdowns, the other enduring issue facing USAF SOF development and deployment is finding the right solution to the menagerie of tasks they are issued. How does one teach an illiterate partisan to fly an airplane in combat? Given the typically-constrained budget, and long developmental timeline to field new aircraft, how can boneyard airframes from previous conflicts be repurposed and retrofitted to achieve new objectives? Finally, considering the covert nature of many mission sets and high level of adverse political consequences if those missions fail, how can operators planning such missions mitigate risk? While the answers to these and similar questions will vary based on the context of the specific mission, this book offers examples of ways in which such difficult questions have been solved in the past.

In sum, *Apollo's Warriors* serves as a useful introduction and reference work for those interested in Cold War airpower, as well as air force special operations. As Col Haas reminds the reader, the mission of the United States Air Force is 'to fly and fight'. This book is a reminder that USAF SOF has a history of flying and fighting in an unorthodox manner, meeting the challenges of quite unusual problems across the span of its history.

About the Author: Dr. Blocksome is an assistant professor of National Security Affairs at Naval War College-Monterey. She also serves as an adjunct professor at US Air Force Special Operations School and at Joint Special Operations University. She is the assistant vice president for research at the Special Operations Research Association and the managing editor of Special Operations Journal.



Book Review

By Ron Dains, PhD

Airpower in Small Wars:

Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists

By James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson

University Press, 2003, 522 pages

It is 13 years since I first read James Corum and Wray Johnson's *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* upon my arrival for duty at the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell AFB, AL. Perusing the text once again, with the benefit of near-daily discussions of the efficacy of ever-changing strategies and operations over many years, it becomes increasingly clear their writing should have served as a clarion call for what is now 15 years of frustration with counterterror and counterinsurgency operations. Coalition and joint efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Horn of Africa, the Caribbean and Central America–and many other places—demonstrate the difficulty of achieving political ends with military means. Despite its many hazards, the use of military force for political purpose is timeless and deserves serious study. Toward that end, comprehending the role of airpower in military operations since the advent of powered flight is critical and the authors provide necessary and focused insight into the "air domain" of war.

Corum and Johnson begin the book by carefully defining and delimiting their discussion to "all forms of aviation employed to combat insurgents and terrorists" which is often captured by the current and broad classification, "small wars." The need for clear definitions is vital in the quest for typology of conflicts over time – small, MOOTW, limited, counterinsurgency, counterterror, major, global, etc. – terms which can cause cognitive dissonance even for those intimately involved in the study or practice of warfighting. The reader benefits from such a clearly established framework for analysis and future writers are presented a model to emulate.

The book's first nine chapters cover a wide array of airpower operations through historical case studies. It begins by addressing early development and use of airpower and the inter-service rivalries that can result from differing world views. Such contentious debates are certain to arise given the current desire to create a "Space Force" equal to the other military ervices. Multiple chapters cover airpower's role in civil and post-colonial wars throughout the century—one that necessitates an understanding of the cultural and political factors involved. It is notable that consideration of these operational factors was championed by General Anthony Zinni and Tony Koltz's *The Battle for Peace* following the General's experiences in the Middle East. Corum and Johnson's exploration of the "complex equation" that was Vietnam illuminates the reality that airpower is but one capability to consider when developing strategies and campaigns. Civilian and military leaders must recognize that one Service or technology alone can rarely bring about desired political ends. The book's latter chapters delve into the more contemporary effort to deal with insurgencies and terrorism. Though only addressing operations up to 2000, the concluding case analysis of the Middle East was prescient in its acknowledgement that "small wars" occur with the backdrop of potential "major conflict." This reality is borne out by the Department of Defense's recent (2010 forward), concern about "great power" conflict. Through well-developed case studies, the reader becomes acutely aware of the fact that war, or the use of force, seems a natural tendency of human interaction. Although the book appears to be focused on the development and evolution of airpower in the 20th century, one is struck by the authors' skillful address of the myriad contextual elements of conflict that all analysts and practitioners should consider as we continue our trek into the 21st century.

Corum and Johnson's concluding chapter outlines "11 lessons" for consideration of which only a few are addressed herein. As indicated previously, the authors advocate for improved comprehension of history. They invoke the Clausewitzian dictum that "in war even the simple things are difficult," which makes it tantamount that policymakers and military strategists approach conflict with a well-developed understanding of the limits of military force, and airpower specifically, as well as an appreciation for the complexity of such undertakings. They also acknowledge that airpower is often in a critical support role when involved in counterinsurgency and counterterror operations – a notion that makes some USAF leaders wince given the institutional desire to be viewed as a "strategic" force. Many people consider airpower in "small wars" as a "low tech" enterprise which the authors support when discussing the capacity of smaller or less developed nations. However, they also argue that there is a critical need for airpower's "high tech" capabilities such as GPS, RPVs, communication, intelligence gathering, etc., that serve as critical "force multipliers" in counterinsurgency and counterterror operations. They discuss the importance of jointness, the need for multi-national effort, and the continuing necessity for military schools to maintain an educational dialogue about "small wars."

Airpower in Small Wars drives home the "ultimate lesson" – war, as a political activity, necessitates robust study, discourse, and analysis. The book has stood the "test of time" and should be in the libraries of all military members, especially those whose primary efforts support special operations around the globe.

About the Author: Ron Dains, PhD, is on the faculty of the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell AFB, AL.

ACA 2018 CONVENTION

DEC 6th - 9th

FORT WALTON BEACH, FLORIDA

Online registration

Coming Soon at AirCommando.org

PROFESSIONAL SEMINARS
Hurlburt Field

AWARDS
Banquet Dinner at The Island, by Hotel RL (formerly Ramada Inn, Okaloosa Island, FWB, FL)

GOLF TOURNEY
Hurlburt Field Gator Lakes Golf Course

All Air Commandos Welcome

Join us for a weekend of professional development, awards, golf, food, and reconnecting with fellow Air Commandos.