

**S**poradic gunfire echoed in the darkness throughout the night as TSgt. Douglas Bowers, a USAF joint terminal attack controller (JTAC), and an advance patrol of the Army's 101st Airborne Division secured a supply route for a combat logistics patrol coming through the mountains of northeast Afghanistan.

Near the Pakistan border, as daylight broke over the approaching combat logistics patrol, bullets snapped past Bowers' perch overlooking the valley. With the resupply route anything but secure, Bowers' job—as a tactical

air control party specialist with JTAC qualification—was coordinating air support and overwatch of soldiers of the 1st Brigade Combat Team.

The situation was about to get messy. Meanwhile, the bomber crew of Bone 21 was heading for a preplanned support mission nearby. The crew was settling in for its six-hour transit into Afghan airspace from their forward base elsewhere in the Middle East.

The B-1B Lancer crew, deployed with the 9th Bomb Squadron from Dyess AFB, Tex., had three or four such assignments each mission—often jetting the breadth of Afghanistan in a single

sortie. Arriving in country, the crew checked in with its assigned JTAC for an updated brief. Not far away, Bowers' situation was quickly deteriorating.

“As the combat logistics patrol moved up to our location, they were taking heavy contact along the main supply route along with our observation post,” Bowers later explained.

From their position overlooking the column, Bowers and SrA. Abel Arriola, another JTAC, were taking machine gun fire and called on several F-15Es for support. Hidden in crags and dense vegetation on the ridges surrounding the patrols, the insurgents were im-

# A Lancer's Long Day

By Aaron M. U. Church, Associate Editor



**Bone 21 worked with embattled JTACs to successfully neutralize a hot spot, save numerous lives, and destroy an enemy command post.**

possible to pinpoint and too dispersed for the Strike Eagle's weapons to have much effect.

Worse still, the enemy quickly caught on that Bowers and Arriola were coordinating the strikes and focused a torrent of fire on them. "We were the focal point for controlling that area and providing overwatch," Bowers said, "so they were trying to tie us up so that we couldn't provide support."

Unable to aid the supply column, and hunkered under a hail of fire, Bowers made a desperate call for heavier support. Conveniently nearby, Bone 21 was hurriedly retasked and broke off to assist.

"The initial picture that [we] got was that there were about three or four enemy firing points that they were using to shoot at the friendly forces in the area," said Capt. Thomas E. Metzger, Bone 21's offensive weapons system officer. Taking the handoff from the F-15Es, Capt. Kevin T. Johnson, the B-1 pilot, knew that the Strike Eagles "had run the course and done great work, but it got to the point where we had to put a lot of weapons down in several different areas."

With three bomb bays loaded with precision weapons, "this was something that we uniquely had the capability to do."

On the radio with Bowers, Metzger scanned the Lancer's Sniper targeting pod over the areas that Bowers suspected insurgents were firing from. "Initially getting a look at the ridgeline, it was kind of like looking at the Matterhorn; it was a really steep face—lots of trees, lots of rocks—very rugged terrain, so we weren't able to pick out individuals in that area, but [Bowers] had correlated this area where he wanted weapons," explained Metzger.

Metzger spaced the bombs evenly along the ridge.

"Their first attack ceased that engagement so that we could focus on



*A B-1 Lancer is paced by an F/A-18F Super Hornet after a close air support mission in Afghanistan.*



*The insurgents were too dispersed for the F-15s to have much effect. The crew of Bone 21 had heavier firepower, though.*

the guys down in the valley,” recounted Bowers. “We got the attacks off quickly on that enemy fighting position due to the speed of the B-1 ... covering the area we needed.”

Bone 21 released several Joint Direct Attack Munitions and spent the next 15 minutes unsuccessfully attempting to locate enemy firing positions hidden in several caves. Blocked by the jagged terrain, the Sniper pod had no luck pinpointing a target, so Bowers took the lead. “We had eyes-on from the ground. They [the insurgents] were setting up fighting positions. ... There were three to four in two groups ... on the high ground,” he said.

### Trapped Under Fire

Talking the B-1 onto a narrow rift between two mountain peaks, Bowers requested that Bone 21 seal the entry to a series of caves. Running in at roughly 0.7 Mach, Bone 21 streaked along the rift, loosing a pair of 500-pound JDAMs that detonated at the bottom of the gully, just missing the slopes on either side of the target line. The strike was perfectly executed.

“All day long, we had to factor in the direction that we’re dropping these weapons because the typical effect ... in sheer terrain is something called clutter,”

explained Johnson. Sometimes weapons “get blocked by the mountain they’re trying to strike.”

The jagged terrain demanded constant awareness, as the bomber pulled away from the target. Even at 20,000 feet, “some of those mountains literally go up a couple of thousand feet [above] the altitude that we’re flying at,” said

Johnson. In this terrain, utilizing the B-1’s swept-wing show of force—stunning the enemy with a full-afterburning transonic pass—is a no-go. Contending with mountain peaks, a Lancer is “almost at that show-of-force altitude the entire time” anyway, admitted Johnson.

On the ground, the logistics train stopped dead. Trapped under machine



*A Sniper pod on a B-1B’s fuselage. Bone 21’s WSOs could see the telltale flashes of gunfire and puffs of smoke from mortars, showing them where to lay the bombs.*

gun fire and occasional mortar attack, friendly casualties were lying in the open.

“Obviously you can’t medevac casualties when there’s an ongoing enemy engagement,” said Bowers, so the air and ground forces had to determine the best way to calm the situation.

Some 400 yards up the mountain, an enemy fighter had the men locked in his machine gun’s firing zone. “They really don’t have anywhere to go and there’s no real ability to shoot back up at the mountains [because] they don’t really know where these attacks are coming from,” said Johnson of the pinned-down forces on the ground. “All they know is that they can’t get out of that situation.”

Metzger panned the Sniper pod’s infrared eye along the slope, following prompts from Bowers below. Peering at the screen, Metzger and Capt. Craig J. Steffek—Bone 21’s defensive weapons



Photo via Capt. Kevin Johnson

**Above, the crew of Bone 21, l-r: Capt. Thomas Metzger, Capt. Kevin Johnson, Capt. Craig Steffek, and Capt. Andrew Long. Left: TSgt. Douglas Bowers, the JTAC on the ground.**



Photo via TSgt. Douglas Bowers

system officer—suddenly spotted the telltale glimmer of muzzle flashes, then a puff of smoke from a mortar. This was the first time the airmen spotted projectiles coming off the mountainside and the ridgeline into the friendly positions, said Metzger.

The WSOs determined the location’s coordinates and sent live imagery to Bowers. Following on his remotely operated video enhanced receiver, Bowers confirmed the ridgeline and the target.

Steffek selected a tight grouping, mixing 500-pound GBU-38s with larger 2,000-pound GBU-31s. Banking to the right to keep the Sniper pod on target, the WSOs confirmed detonation.

The effect was immediate. Pulling away from the target “everything had stopped, which is usually a good indication,” said Capt. Andrew F. Long,

mission copilot. With the bomb detonations echoing in the background, Steffek could hear the troops near Bowers’ radio cheering the blasts. “That’s a unique feeling—a reassurance for us the aircrew,” he said.

Three-and-a-half hours after Bone 21 arrived, “we were actually about to be done for the day,” said Long, even though the aircraft was capable of loitering for almost six hours over the battlefield. A flight of F-16s was inbound to relieve the bomber.

But Bone 21 was not through. Locked in another all-day fight, at what had become a routine hot spot, other ground forces were pinned down not far from Bowers’ post and still within his area of responsibility.

“The situation was pretty dire up there,” said Johnson.

The enemy had set up fighting positions along a roughly 175-yard ridgeline, and the ground commander requested that Bowers call in a bomb strike across the entire span. Knowing this was “something that the F-16s are definitely not going to be able to do, unless they launch an entire squadron,” Bone 21 addressed the tasking, delivering half the bomber’s remaining payload in a single precision pass.

### **Bad Guys on the Ridgeline**

“With all of those weapons going off near simultaneously,” the string of JDAMs shattered the mountaintop, decimating trees, rocks, and insurgents alike, reported Long. “I was a fairly new pilot, but I think most guys would say it was one of the bigger strikes they’d seen.”

For the troops, “that was a very decisive moment,” said Bowers. The strike saved lives on the ground and allowed the troops to regroup. With the enemy now in disarray, it was finally possible to medevac the wounded to safety, said Bowers.

Darkness was settling in the valleys, and despite the B-1’s huge fuel load, Bone 21 was approaching “bingo fuel,” when her crew had to turn for home.

Bone 21 checked the area for any signs the enemy was still preparing for a counterattack overnight. Bowers requested a single fly-past of a



*Bone 21 called it a day after six hours in the fight over Afghanistan, putting a world of hurt on a hot spot in the mountains. The total mission, from takeoff to landing, lasted nearly 18 hours.*

specific small bunker—thought to be a command node—that he and his fellow JTACs had been keeping a close eye on. “We went back up there and we were looking at this target, and again like usual we didn’t see anyone up there,” said Long. The only indications of human presence on the mountaintop were a few parapets—possibly mortar pits.

Long said that just as they were about to head for home, “we see someone come out of the ridgeline.”

He knew that on a cold November night in the mountains, anyone hardy enough to venture out is “most likely up to no good.” As several more men emerged on the mountaintop, the bomber crew waited for word from Bowers about “what to do with these guys,” said Long. After conferring with intelligence, Bowers said over the radio, “Yep, these guys are bad and we want you to strike this location.”

With fuel dwindling, Bone 21’s crew went into action once again. “We start setting up this bomb run. We’re selecting our weapons and about to execute on the top of this mountain, and the guys start moving ... faster than we’d be able to drop a bomb on them,” said Long. (This problem has since been remedied by adding Laser JDAMs to the Lancer’s arsenal.)

Bowers asked the bomber crew to track the men, to see where they would go. By this time, Bone 21 was about to need an emergency tanker just to make it home.

Suddenly, a building appeared in Metzger’s viewfinder. The group was heading straight for it. “You don’t find compounds up in this area. ... There should not be a building,” said Johnson, stressing the importance of the find.

### **One Strike, One Chance**

As more people converged on the building, Bone 21’s situation turned critical.

While awaiting intelligence confirmation from Bowers, Johnson received a call saying a severe thunderstorm was moving over the Mideast airfield they had launched from. Johnson was ordered to carry extra fuel back in case the crew needed to divert or practice several landing approaches in the “bare-minimum” weather conditions at the base. What this meant, of course, was that there was even less fuel available for the battle over the Afghan mountains.

“We’ve got a one-strike, one-chance kind of situation to actually hit these guys at the one time they’re vulnerable,” as they moved to the compound, asserted Johnson. “We literally tell the [JTAC], ‘Hey, listen, we have one more spin over

this area and we’re going home because we’re going to run out of fuel.’”

Johnson called for an emergency tanker as the WSOs input strike parameters into the bombing computer—just in case an attack confirmation came in the nick of time. As Bone 21 banked homeward, Bowers confirmed the target as hostile.

“From the intel confirmation to when the weapons actually came off the jet was about 30 to 45 seconds—definitely the fastest strike I’ve ever been a part of, when it comes to confirmation to actually weapons off the jet,” said Johnson.

After a mad dash to rendezvous with the tanker, the crew could finally reflect. In more than six hours over Afghanistan, Bone 21 successfully opened resupply to the forward operating base, neutralized a perennial hot spot, saved numerous lives, and destroyed the command post controlling enemy attacks in the area. “The hurt that we put on them that day was very significant and it contributed to decreased enemy activity from that point on,” summed up Bowers.

Bone 21 was named the Air Force’s 2010 bomber crew of the year for the November 2010 mission and was honored last September with the Air Force Association’s Gen. Curtis E. LeMay Award. ■