

# Silent Leadership—At a Cost

In early April, the US Navy launched a large attack against the airfield from which Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad launched aircraft to egregiously attack his own civilians with sarin nerve gas.

News reports and Trump administration statements quickly laid out the details: Fifty-nine Tomahawk Land-Attack Cruise Missiles targeted Syria's al-Shayrat airfield in a strike designed to destroy aircraft and ground infrastructure.

The Tomahawks were launched from the Navy destroyers *Ross* and *Porter* in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The Pentagon immediately released dramatic photos and videos of the missiles firing from the decks of the Navy destroyers.

The attack was perfectly described in the explanatory accounts, and the details helped readers and viewers understand the attack and how the Navy made it happen.

Compare this with another high-profile attack on ISIS later the same month.

On April 13, "US Forces Afghanistan conducted a strike on an [ISIS]-Khorasan tunnel complex in ... Afghanistan, as part of ongoing efforts to defeat ISIS-K in Afghanistan," read the Pentagon's official announcement.

"The strike used a GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb dropped from a US aircraft," the statement continued.

"This is the right munition to reduce these obstacles and maintain the momentum of our offensive against ISIS-K," said Army Gen. John W. Nicholson, commander of US Forces Afghanistan, in the news release.

Notably absent was any reference to the Air Force in describing a "US Forces Afghanistan" attack and a MOAB bomb dropped from "a US aircraft." This is technically correct, but it would also be correct to say US citizens conducted the strike from a flying machine.

When the Pentagon released video of this attack, a description began, "A GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb strikes an

ISIS-K cave and tunnel system," as if the MOAB delivered itself. In reality, America's most powerful non-nuclear weapon was developed by the Air Force Research Laboratory and was delivered by the crew of an Air Force Special Operations Command MC-130.

Unfortunately this is not an isolated incident. It is frequently difficult to learn of the Air Force's wartime contributions, for a variety of reasons.

Part of it is a service culture that avoids the limelight, with many airmen preferring to quietly get the job done without calling attention to themselves. Rather than proudly touting its accomplishments, something the other services relish, USAF often shuns the spotlight.

Part of it is the nature of today's wars. When reporters are embedded with ground units in war zones, they will see the war up close, but what they see will be war from the ground perspective.

**You may not have heard, but the Air Force is flying three-quarters of the missions against ISIS.**

The Navy has videographers at the ready (as was seen aboard *Ross* and *Porter*) and regularly brings reporters aboard its deployed vessels. Jennifer Hlad, a former *Air Force Magazine* senior editor, was recently invited aboard the carrier *George H. W. Bush* as it patrolled the Persian Gulf.

Meanwhile, it is difficult to gain access to wartime air bases. Many of them are officially in "undisclosed locations," as several Middle Eastern nations prefer to keep the fact that US forces are operating from their soil an open secret.

Part of it is misperception. Since 1992, the Air Force has made air war look easy, when it is not. The service has excelled against enemies that lack advanced technology or modern air defenses, leading many to conclude that aged B-52s, KC-135s, and F-16s are good enough for whatever the US may face. Old systems, no matter how well maintained, will not be good enough against a more sophisticated enemy—unless the US is willing to accept unnecessary deaths.

These factors accumulate to become a lack of appreciation for the Air Force's role defending the nation and winning its wars. Over time, this negatively affects USAF's stature, influence, and funding. For example, the Air Force has in recent years been repeatedly stymied in its efforts to shed excess infrastructure, retire old aircraft, and fund its modernization programs.

The Air Force fully embraces joint and coalition warfare—and is a full partner in it. No service should fight alone. When USAF's contributions remain behind the scenes, however, it reduces awareness and, ultimately, dollars. This is a real-world problem, as funding for Air Force programs is now down to 21.4 percent of the defense budget. That fact is rarely mentioned.

The Air Force alone is flying 80 percent of the sorties and dropping 70 percent of all bombs targeting ISIS. That fact is also rarely mentioned.



**An Alabama Air National Guard F-16 arrives at an undisclosed location in Southwest Asia. USAF has made air war look quiet and easy, but it is not.**

Photo: MSgt. Benjamin Wilson