

Airmen adapt to the McChrystal directive.

Holding Fire Afghanistan

By David Wood



Above: An F-15 thunders off on a dawn close air support mission from Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan.

USAF fighters, their lethal munitions hanging underwing, streaked down a mile of concrete and lifted off, engines glowing against the distant Hindu Kush mountains. They were en route to a battle zone where a group of US troops was pinned down under heavy enemy fire, in need of help.

These were F-16s and F-15Es, and this was Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. There, in perhaps the most complex war US forces ever have fought, one comes face to face with a sharp change in counterinsurgency airpower.

How sharp? Stand in the old Soviet-built tower at Bagram with Brig. Gen. Steven L. Kwast, commander of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, and

hear him assert, “If we are near civilians and engaged with the enemy, and we can disengage, we should disengage. ... Counterinsurgency is not about killing the enemy. It’s about protecting the people.”

Winning the war, he went on, comes down to a simple matter of trust. “The moment the Afghan people trust us, we will win overnight,” said Kwast.

Over

USAF photo by SSGT. Samuel Morse

How, he is asked, do you build trust through airpower?

“By making sure you are only using airpower responsibly, that you are only using airpower when there is no other way to protect civilians,” Kwast said. “We have to protect the people, so that every time they hear an airplane they know, ‘It’s there to protect me.’”

After playing a dazzlingly successful role in ousting the Taliban from Afghanistan in 2001, airpower in Afghanistan has become—fairly or unfairly—associated with the problem that has had a bigger effect than anything else in undercutting that trust: civilian casualties. Civilians have been killed in operations by insurgents and coalition forces alike, of course. However, air strikes have gotten most of the bad press. US military authorities last summer issued a tactical directive tightening the rules on the use of air attacks.

The effect on fighter crew members has been dramatic. It is, in fact, a fundamental shift in strategy for a fighter guy, said Col. James J. Beissner, an

Below: Troops from the 12th Infantry Regiment keep an eye out for insurgents while fellow soldiers dodge heavy sniper fire in a gun battle at Waterpur Valley in Afghanistan’s Kunar province.



DOD photo by Sgt. Matthew Moeller



USAF F-15E fighters drop 2,000-pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions on a cave in eastern Afghanistan.

AP photo

F-15E pilot and vice commander of the 455th.

Beissner went on, “It used to be, the ground commander requested a bomb, and a bomb he got.” Now, the ground commander requests a bomb, and the joint terminal attack controller, the aircrew, and the ground commander all talk about it, said Beissner. “‘Do we really need to go kinetic, or is there a better approach?’”

Who Are These Guys?

Responsibility now falls on fighter pilots and other aircrew members to work with ground forces to find, if possible, a solution other than releasing ordnance on a target.

“It’s very effective and it’s changed the way we fight—for the better,” said Beissner.

Examples of the changed atmosphere abound. Capt. Roberto Flammia was flying his F-16 over eastern Afghanistan one night when he spied several men wearing backpacks and running along a mountain streambed toward a US position. Flammia discussed the targets with a nearby JTAC,



Afghan security forces keep watch over a burned fuel tanker north of Kabul. The tanker was hijacked by Taliban forces and then destroyed by an F-15E.

who asked him to strafe the men with his 20 mm cannon.

“I said, No, there’s no reason to,” Flammia recalled. “We’re not gonna blow up guys who just look suspicious.”

On another nighttime mission, Beissner was cued by a Predator unmanned aerial vehicle to three men racing away from a US position. The ground com-

mander requested a bomb, but Beissner judged the targets to be too close to civilian houses.

“The real question was, who were these guys?” said Beissner. “Do we really know?”

Hurried conversations between aircrew, ground commander, and the JTAC didn’t bring a clear answer to

those questions, so no ordnance was dropped.

“We decided it’s just not worth alienating the population,” Beissner said.

The problem of casualties and perception has been around quite a while now.

In July 2002, scores of Afghans were killed or injured when ordnance fired from an AC-130 struck a wedding party in Oruzgan province southwest of Kabul. The US command said the aircraft was responding to ground fire; the Afghan government claimed the shots were from wedding guests who, as is the custom, were firing guns into the air in celebration. The aircrew was cleared of wrongdoing, but 48 Afghans died.

From that time on, nearly every air strike has brought loud claims from the Taliban that the US is killing innocents.

Never mind that the Taliban itself has been responsible for most civilian deaths, as documented in a series of studies by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. During the first half of 2009, for example, UNAMA reported 1,013 civilian Afghan casualties, 24 percent higher than the same period in 2008. The Taliban and related insurgents caused 59 percent of the casualties, while pro-government forces (US, coalition, and Afghan security forces) were responsible for 30.5 percent.

The imbalance is unmistakable: During the six-month period, UNAMA recorded 40 air strikes, which killed 200 civilians, while 400 civilians were killed by Taliban improvised explosive devices or suicide bomb attacks.

As casualties mounted in early 2009, however, it was errant coalition air strikes that aroused international condemnation—and a stiff reaction in Washington. “I believe that the civilian casualties are doing us an enormous harm in Afghanistan, and we have got to do better,” Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said.

It was no surprise when Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who replaced Gen. David D. McKiernan as the top commander in Afghanistan last year, moved quickly to sharply limit the use of air strikes.

“This is different from conventional combat,” McChrystal wrote in a July 2 directive. “We must avoid the trap of winning tactical victories—but suffering strategic defeats—by causing civilian casualties ... and thus alienating the people. ... [The] loss of popular

DOD photo by Spc. Matthew Thompson



Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal (l) speaks with an ISAF soldier from the Czech Republic during a visit to a forward operating base in Afghanistan. McChrystal has ordered that air strikes be limited.

support will be decisive to either side in this struggle.”

Air strikes would be authorized only under “very limited and prescribed conditions,” McChrystal wrote.

Ever since, US airmen, soldiers, sailors, and marines have been adjusting to the new strictures.

The stakes grow exponentially when American troops are taking a pummeling from the enemy and need help immediately. With additional troops pouring into Afghanistan and the Taliban and other insurgent groups broadening the fight, reports of “troops in contact” (TIC) incidents are growing—peaking at 670 for the month of August 2009, up from 485 the previous August.

The stress on aircrews and ground forces goes up exponentially as well. When a guy on the ground says he needs a bomb now, “to say, ‘Well, hold on a second,’ that’s frustrating,” said Beissner.

Fluid, Rapid-response Strikes

There is no question that TIC situations generate the greatest number of errant bombings. In a major report in fall 2008, the organization Human Rights Watch said:

“In our investigation, we found that civilian casualties rarely occur during planned air strikes on suspected Taliban targets. ... High civilian loss of life during air strikes has almost

always occurred during the fluid, rapid-response strikes, often carried out in support of ground troops after they came under insurgent attack. Such unplanned strikes included situations where US special forces units—normally small numbers of lightly armed personnel—came under insurgent attack; in US-NATO attacks in pursuit of insurgent forces that had retreated to populated villages; and in air attacks where US ‘anticipatory self-defense’ rules of engagement applied.”

Changing tactics, techniques, and procedures has not been easy for crews trained to put maximum firepower on target.

Lt. Col. Timothy Gosnell, an F-16 pilot, is the commander of the 421st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron from Hill AFB, Utah, which arrived in Afghanistan last July. Gosnell recounted a typical event: A young man comes up on the radio net. “You hear firing in the background, and he says, ‘Good evening, Viper One,’ and a few minutes later, you can hear the fear in his voice. He’s really scared.”

For the pilot, said Gosnell, it becomes a matter of being able to interpret everything on the targeting pod and asking, “Can I really do something here?” Gosnell said, “We are put in the position of being, really, the voice of reason. That falls on us.”

US ground troops have embraced a number of procedures designed to



USAF photo by SSgt. Christine Jones

US soldiers patrol Anzala Khil village in Afghanistan. Insurgents' ability to blend in with the local environment makes close air support challenging.

minimize civilian casualties. To deal with the threat of a speeding car headed for a checkpoint, soldiers use a series of steps, each one an escalation of hostility. Soldiers might, in succession, make hand signals, flash lights, fire a rifle shot into the air, shoot out the car's tires, and shoot the driver.

Similarly, airmen use such "escalation of force" tactics to try to resolve a situation on the ground without using direct and lethal force. This builds on an inherent American advantage—most insurgents do not want to engage in direct combat with US forces, preferring to strike and quickly withdraw. And insurgents have come to respect American airpower.

When called for help where troops are in contact with the enemy, for example, an F-15E or F-16 pilot will descend to 5,000 feet and rip across the combat zone "just to let them know we're here," said one pilot. Often, that is enough to convince insurgents to break off contact and disappear. If not, a pilot may dive to 500 feet in a simulated attack—usually enough to drive off insurgents.

Such "shows of force" make up about 10 percent of the roughly 70 close air support sorties that airmen fly every day in the Afghan battlespace.

Often, the enemy fighters will attempt to regroup. If they have moved well away from civilians and friendly forces, pilots will attack with real munitions.

"The intent is to reduce collateral damage—not to minimize effects on

the enemy," said Col. Keith McBride, deputy director of the combined air and space operations center (CAOC) in Southwest Asia.

It might seem that, after repeated nonlethal shows of force, Afghan insurgents would conclude that there is nothing to fear other than ear-splitting noise when American aircraft appear overhead. Not so, said McBride.

"It's like the theory of deterrence," he said. "If there is no real threat, then there is no real deterrence. And we are still bombing."

Eyeballs in the Sky

Through last summer's "fighting season," the number of air munitions released rose from 437 in June to a high of 660 in October. More significantly, though, is the percent of all CAS missions that went "kinetic," i.e., involved releasing bombs, rockets, or other munitions.

In June, 5.6 percent of all CAS missions in Afghanistan went kinetic. In August, when the pace of fighting reached its high point, just over 11 percent of US CAS missions went kinetic; by October, the rate had dropped to less than one percent.

Even in nonkinetic situations, fighters will show up and circle around to see what else is in the vicinity.

"A lot of times, with airpower overhead, all the ground commander wants is to see over the next hill" so he can make a tactical decision about whether to stay engaged with the enemy, attack them with air munitions, or simply scare them away, said Col. Mark Waite, director of combat operations at the CAOC. "Eyeballs in the sky can give that commander the situational awareness he needs to make that decision."

American pilots enjoy broad discretion about using each of the classified steps in escalation of force, and there can still be shortcuts.

"Sometimes, that voice on the radio down there causes you to skip a step or two," said Gosnell. He added that if you can hear that fear in the voice, it may be time to skip the discussion and just act.

According to military doctrine, the ground commander has the final say about using airpower to affect his situation on the ground, but aircrews never lose accountability for the munitions they drop.

CAS missions in Afghanistan are likely to continue apace. Coalition aircrews are flying an increasing number of CAS sorties, growing last year from 1,792 in January to a high of 2,502 in August.

Whether the shift in air tactics has had an effect on civilian casualties is unclear. Air strikes involving civilians often take place in remote areas not easily reachable by military authorities, and the dead are quickly buried in accordance with Islamic cultural practices.

Civilians still die. That happened in early September, when an F-15E released bombs on a gathering of Taliban fighters who had hijacked two fuel tanker trucks. A German air controller north of Kabul called in the strike, and there was concern that the tankers would be turned into massive and deadly bombs.

Unfortunately, civilians were among the people gathered around the two trucks, and as many as 142 were killed or injured in the strike and its aftermath. Taliban propagandists were quick to capitalize on the incident, demanding an international investigation.

Meanwhile, the jet aircraft continue to lift off from Bagram and Kandahar Airfields in 24-hour operations, their wings loaded with ordnance and their crews deeply sensitive to airpower's new counterinsurgency role. ■

David Wood is the national security correspondent for Politics Daily. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Desert Airlift," appeared in the October 2007 issue.