

Buildup and Battle

Afghanistan's Bagram Airfield has grown to accommodate a greater Air Force mission.

**Photography by Clive Bennett
Text by June Lee**





A C-17 Globemaster III rolls to a stop on a Bagram runway after a resupply mission. Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, has been a hotspot for NATO and US operations in Southwest Asia and there are no signs of the pace letting up.

In Afghanistan, Bagram Airfield hosts several thousand airmen and other troops, deployed from all over the world. The 455th Air Expeditionary Wing at Bagram provides air support to coalition and NATO International Security Assistance Forces on the ground. **11** The air traffic control tower is one of the busiest places on Bagram Airfield, with more than 100 movements taking place in a day. Civilian air traffic controllers keep an eye on the runway and the skies above Afghanistan. **12** An F-15E from the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath, UK, taxis past revetments for the start of another mission. All F-15s over Afghanistan fly two-ship sorties. **13** A CH-47 Chinook from the Georgia Army National Guard undergoes line maintenance by Army Spc. Cody Staley and Spc. Joe Dominguez (in the helicopter).





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111 A1C Aaron Simonson gives F-16 pilot Capt. Nathan Harrold the approval to head off on a mission. Both air and ground crews share a mutual respect that acknowledges their joint duty of getting the job done. 121 Sikorsky personnel service a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter at Bagram. Army Black Hawks and USAF Pave Hawks regularly evacuate the wounded out of dangerous areas.

131 M-ATVs in a C-17 at Bagram wait to be unloaded. These mine-resistant ambush-protected all-terrain vehicles support Afghanistan operations by protecting ground troops from improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades. 141 Concrete revetment walls are decorated by the various squadrons that deploy to Afghanistan. Displayed here are the combat records of two F-16 squadrons: the 34th

EFS, Hill AFB, Utah, and the 79th EFS, Shaw AFB, S.C. 151 Ground crew members from the 455th AEW refuel a C-17. The time it takes to refuel can be as little as 40 minutes from “brakes on to brakes release.”

11 Six GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (foreground) sit on a trolley ready to be loaded onto aircraft. These specific JDAMS will be loaded onto F-16s for future operations. **12** Three Navy Prowlers are being prepared for a morning sortie. The EA-6Bs belong to the Marine Corps VMAQ-1 electronic warfare squadron. **13** These signs, found all around the base, are a sobering reminder of the danger coalition forces face each day. **14** Capt. Neil Gregory, with the 4th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, steps off an MC-12 after completing an intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance mission tracking Taliban movements. The Liberty Project Aircraft have been a valuable asset, providing real-time ISR, since they first arrived at Bagram.





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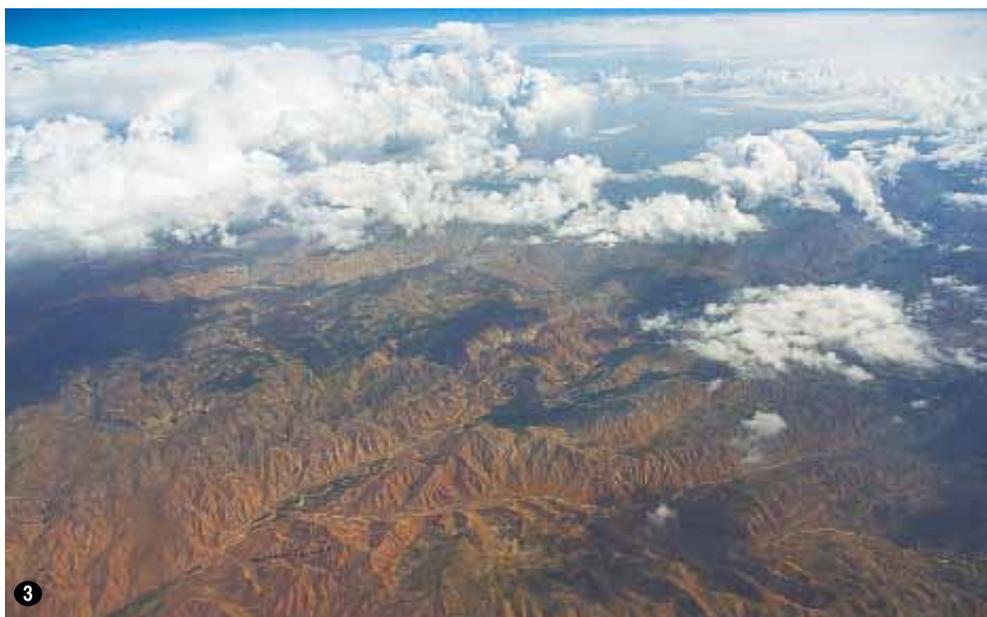
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111 An F-15E Strike Eagle roars off the runway for the start of a mission over Afghanistan. This aircraft was deployed from Lakenheath, with the 492nd Fighter Squadron. 121 C-130s are a mainstay at Bagram. The number of airlift missions will not dwindle any time soon. 131 Capt. Matthew Strohmeier and Capt. Miguel Santibanez, pilot and weapons system officer, respectively, complete last-minute checks of their aircraft before loading up on munitions. They are both deployed from Lakenheath. 141 The fire truck Engine 17 races past fighter aircraft while checking emergency response times on the base.

11 Air traffic controller Tizrah Berlin uses a signal light gun, a handheld device that shoots red, green, and white light beams to communicate with aircraft. The light beams can travel up to four miles. **12** SSgt. Daniel Templeton of the 455th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron wipes down the windscreen of an F-15E. Thorough cleaning is important to remove sand and bugs that build up over time. **13** Air transportation is crucial to a country like Afghanistan where its rugged terrain makes it difficult to deliver aid quickly by ground. **14** Capt. Thomas Stevens and 1st Lt. Kevin Kubik prepare to land a C-17 at Bagram. They are delivering a Humvee and a radar unit from Ramstein AB, Germany. **15** Fire crew members climb into a fire truck for a practice run.





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111 An F-16 taxis to the main runway prior to a mission. This aircraft is armed with two wing-mounted AIM-120 AMRAAMs, two GBU-12 Paveway bombs, a GBU-38 JDAM, and a GBU-54 LJDAM. For F-16s at Bagram, this is a common weapons load. 121 An aerial view of Bagram. 131 An F-16C from the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano AB, Italy, displays two GBU-38 JDAMs under its left wing. 141 A broader view of the concrete revetments turned canvas board for the squadrons at Bagram. From left to right, the 492nd "Mad Hatters," 336th "Rocketeers," 391st "Bold Tigers," 74th "Flying Tigers," 81st "Panthers," and the 190th "Skull-bangers" brighten up the landscape. ■