

Airman comments about firefight

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10/15/2009 - **BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan (AFNS)** -- "I won't forget them as long as I live."

Those are the words of Capt. Gordon Olde, an F-15E Strike Eagle weapon system officer following a battle at a remote military base about 10 miles from Pakistan that erupted on the morning of Oct. 3 that highlighted the unbreakable bond between Airmen and Soldiers.

In a steep valley in the Nuristan Province in Northeast Afghanistan, combat outposts Keating and Fritsche were attacked by hundreds of militants from multiple firing positions, according to an International Security Assistance Force statement.

Within minutes, Air Force aircraft were on scene and engaging the enemy, said Army 1st Lt. Cason Shrode, COP Keating's fires support officer.

"We received a heavy volley of fire," the lieutenant said referring to the initial wave of enemies. However, "we had so many different assets up in the air ... they were stacked on so many different levels ... we had everything we needed."

Lieutenant Shrode, working from his secondary tactical operations center because his primary location was on fire from the attack, was in contact with Senior Airman Angel Montes, a joint terminal attack controller from San Diego, and Airman 1st Class Stephen Kellams, a native of Tampa, Fla., serving as a radio operator maintenance and driver, or ROMAD for short. Both Airmen are deployed from the 13th Air Support Operations Squadron, Fort Carson, Colo. and were at a forward operating base about 20 miles away.

With buildings already on fire, a formation of two F-15Es rolled in overhead and immediately saw the enemy.

"(Tthe enemy) were on the surrounding ridges," said Captain Olde, flying in an F-15E over the area referring to the combat outpost surrounded by steep mountain-peaks on three sides. "A major attack was apparent to us from the moment we showed up. I knew something big was unfolding before our eyes; all I could think about were the guys on the ground."

The first F-15Es on the scene were helmed by Capt. Isaac Bell, an F-15E pilot, and Captain Olde, as well as Capt. Dave Nierenberg, an F-15E pilot, and British Flight Lt. James Siwicki, a weapon system officer. All aircrew were part of the 335th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron deployed from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C.

Capt. Mike Polidor and 1st Lt. Aaron Dove arrived later over the combat outpost and assumed the roles of tactical air controller airborne.



An F-15E Strike Eagle, like the one pictured here, battled insurgents at combat outposts Keating and Fritsche, where nearly 100 militants were killed by the combined response that included Afghan soldiers as well as U.S. air and ground units Oct. 3, 2009. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. John Jung)



A B-1B Lancer, similar to this one, battled insurgents at combat outposts Keating and Fritsche, where nearly 100 militants were killed by the combined response that included Afghan soldiers as well as U.S. air and ground units Oct. 3, 2009. (U.S. Air Force photo)

"That's something we don't often train for, but they executed it perfectly by funneling all the JTAC's information to the other jets that showed up," Captain Olde said. "They did an incredible job and no-doubt saved numerous lives on the ground due to their organized and methodical employment of airpower."

Communication on the ground was scarce initially due to the very harsh terrain, according to the F-15E aircrew. However, they quickly developed a way around this by splitting up their typical two-ship formation and placed one aircraft over a nearby forward operating base some 20 miles away. At this forward operating base, the JTAC teams were linked to Lieutenant Shrode, the fires support officer via F-15E aircraft.

"We were in disbelief as to what was going on," said Staff Sgt. Adam Burns, the JTAC NCO in charge and native of San Antonio. "We had every air asset we could imagine. We pushed so many aircraft that we never really worried about ammo conservation."

Sergeant Burns and his ROMAD, Staff Sgt. Sean Quinn a native of Memphis, Tenn., would later find themselves infiltrating into Combat Outpost Keating as part of American reinforcements.

"We were able to get comms with the (AH-64) Apaches supporting Keating and we relayed for them to the JTAC that (insurgents) were inside the wire," Captain Olde, a WSO with four years in the Air Force said about the Army's AH-64s.

After a successful bomb run, Captain Olde and Captain Bell went back in with their cannon and employed a "single strafe pass, then had to head back to refuel," Captain Olde said handing the fight over to fellow squadron members.

"I cued the Sniper pod to the burning COP and it hit me how serious things were," said 1st Lt. Aaron Dove, a weapon system officer and native of Hudson, Wisc. "The main thing in my mind was to do my job well because this was a time when the guys on the ground needed us most."

Lieutenant Dove and Captain Polidor were two that set themselves over the nearby forward operating base acting as a radio relay and coordinated airstrikes of a B-1B Lancer bomber and F-15Es all while coordinating between two bases and Army Apache helicopters with a thunderstorm rapidly approaching.

"We coordinated and relayed many airstrikes with various aircraft," Lieutenant Dove said. "By the time we got home, we had been airborne for eight hours, strafed mountainous terrain in dangerous weather, and integrated more than 30 bombs on targets around Keating; none of which caused any friendly injuries or fatalities or civilian casualties."

Despite claims from the Taliban, both outposts were in the process of a scheduled repositioning as part of a security strategy to focus more on populated areas, according to Combined Joint Task Force-82 officials here.

"Despite what the Taliban say, the COP was not overrun," said Lt. Col. Clarence Counts, the Combined Joint Task Force-82 public affairs officer. "Our American and Afghan forces fought valiantly and defeated a highly coordinated attack inflicting heavy casualties."

"The biggest thing I gained from this whole ordeal is that the real heroes out here in Afghanistan are the guys on the ground, especially those who gave their lives so that their friends could go home to their families," Lieutenant Dove said.

Nearly 100 militants were killed by the combined response that included Afghan soldiers as well as U.S. air and ground units. Eight Americans and three Afghans were killed, while nine Americans and 11 Afghans were wounded, according to CJTF-82 officials.

"There is no doubt that without the incredible air support we received, it would have been a much worse day," said Army Lt. Col. Robert Brown, 3-61 Cavalry commander from the 4th Infantry Division of Fort Carson, Colo. "Your ability to keep a steady flow of aircraft and ordnance on the enemy turned what could have been a terrible defeat into a hard fought victory."

"My hat goes off to those Americans on the ground who fought so bravely, especially those who gave their lives serving their country," Captain Olde said. "I won't forget them for as long as I live."