



## The Unknown Mission

# Joint personnel recovery

**By Lt. Col. David Looney**  
210 Expeditionary Rescue  
Squadron commander

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — The battle space we operate in endures great change as Afghanistan develops into a self-sustaining, cooperative partner in our global community. Just five years ago the darkness of the “Bagram Bowl” was daunting for a major city. Today the “Bowl” is lit by electrical power that extends in every direction.

As progress continues in Afghanistan, the complex role of personnel recovery has, inversely, become more difficult. Large agencies, even those with common goals, don’t easily lend themselves to integration. Internet-based messaging, better secure-voice, and satellite communications are fabulous tools. But we still have to get face to face to overcome basic human deficiencies in information sharing and coordination.

The goal of every good personnel recovery organization is speed and patient care. The questions then begin to branch out. Who is our primary customer? How do we best meet their needs? What are our priorities? The tendency may be to stay in our lane when picking our



*Two HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters on a training mission in Afghanistan.*

priorities, but the fortunate fact is the Air Force has yet to lose a fighter or any other aircraft to enemy action.

While we maintain a constant state of readiness to respond to such action, our best way to prepare is to take on more pressing work for our sister service. The Army requires hundreds, if not thousands of medical evacuations every year. The training and resources of our combat search and rescue-focused crews can do a great deal to ease the burden for the Army medical evacuation crews.

While MEDEVAC is not CSAR, it is a complimentary task. Most of my flying came at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska while flying sling

loads, range personnel, photographers, and other strap hangers to every mountain top within 200 miles. In addition, I was flying lots of missions in challenging Alaskan terrain and weather doing civil search and rescue. I wasn’t doing CSAR, but I was learning how to fly a helicopter. I was learning the proactive stance required for our job.

During tactical training, this allowed me to focus a greater percentage of my limited personal CPU to crunching tactical problems and mitigating the threats the enemy adds to a combat mission. You can’t get better training for flying in

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# Wing holds memorial vigil

**By Capt. Toni Tones**

455 Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – Airmen of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing recognized two of its fallen comrades, and honored many others who have given their lives, during a wreath-laying and silent vigil ceremony here May 26.

“As Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines, we go forward, risk our lives, fight and sometimes die,” said Brig. Gen. Mike Holmes, 455 AEW commander during the opening remarks. “It’s fitting to be here on Memorial Day honoring our fallen comrades. It’s also sobering considering we just paid tribute to another fallen hero earlier today during a fallen comrade ceremony...a testament that our struggle continues.”

Tech. Sgt. William Jefferson and Senior Airman Jonathan A. V. Yelner were recognized with nameplates and joined 19 other Airmen on the Fallen Airmen Board located on the wall of Route 5/6 on Camp Cunningham. Camp Cunningham is named after Pararescueman Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham, who gave his life in Afghanistan while saving 10 others.

Sergeant Jefferson, a combat controller working with Special Forces, died March 22 of wounds suffered when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in the Zharmi District of Kandahar Province. Sergeant Jefferson was assigned to the 21 Special Tactics Squadron at Pope Air Force Base, N.C.

Airman Yelner, a convoy driver assigned to the Kapisa and Parwan Provincial Reconstruction Team, died April 29 of wounds suffered when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device near Tag Ab in Kapisa Province. Airman Yelner was a B-1B weapons load crew member assigned to the 28th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.

“Today we started out with a fallen comrade ceremony honoring a hero like our Airmen who were recognized...all were individuals who put



*BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – Master Sgt. James Roth, 455th Expeditionary Force Support Squadron, stands watch during the 11-hour silent vigil here May 26. (U.S. Air Force photo by Capt. Toni Tones)*

service before self,” said 455 AEW Command Chief Master Sgt. Ray Clark. “Ceremonies like these put everything in perspective defining why we are here, and more importantly, why we serve.”

General Holmes echoed the Chief’s sentiments describing the ceremony as “simple, but powerful and important.”

“Today, we remember and renew our commitment,” said the general. “We will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail at the task we’re given. We must remain faithful to it and to each another.”

Immediately following the ceremony, General Holmes and Chief Clark took the first of 66 watches during the 11-hour silent vigil where 131 Airmen and one civilian guarded the wreath laid at the camp’s flag pole from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Afghanistan on dark nights than flying in Afghanistan on dark nights. When the area becomes as familiar to you as your backyard, the thought processes become faster to figure those three critical things to all pilots: fuel, weather, and power. A great sense of calm and confidence arises when you find that you are familiar with the all the demands placed on you by our constantly changing, complex mission, and you can “get ahead of the aircraft.” What that translates to in a commander’s terms is safety. Crews that build that confidence doing a complex mission like MEDEVAC around the theater are more prepared to accomplish the even more complex mission of CSAR.

Why then is the subject of this article joint personnel recovery? Because it takes effort and focus to pursue this opportunity for our Air Force crews. We have to go over and shake hands with the Army

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and get to know our partners. Emails and phone calls leave much to chance and the feedback you get from a face-to-face meeting cannot be replaced.

Every commander, as we cycle through the theater, needs to make the effort. In my own meetings I discovered what the real obstacles were to getting the MEDEVAC calls we wanted from the Army Personnel Recovery Coordination Center: slow approval process, misunderstanding of the pararescue medical capabilities, and our assumable threat/risk level. For the price of an hour and a free cup of coffee the short road to solving most issues was clear.

Less than eight hours after my last meeting, our squadron transported three Soldiers to the theater hospital here. Diverted from a normal training flight, our crews visited two new forward operating bases crossing difficult terrain for the first time, and treated three severely injured Afghan National Police, all on a night brightly lit by a full moon. If the call comes on a dark, hazy night to return to this area for a CSAR, my crews will be that much more prepared.

Our warfighter focus in the rescue business is, in the end, about the patient. In this theater that means the ground pounders. They need our help and we need the experience. The “jointness” of this is obviously symbiotic. Getting beyond “empire building,” “fighting the last war,” and “stove-piping” allows us to gain the pride that comes with proficiency, morale that comes from making a difference in a deployment, and flexibility that is indeed the key to air power.

## News Briefs

### MUSIC NIGHTS

Stop by the Camp Cunningham Recreation Tent to listen to your favorite genre of music...there’s something for everyone. R&B Music Night is Friday at 2100L/1630Z. Country Music Night is Sunday at 1800L/1330Z. Salsa Night is Monday at 2030L/1600Z.

### COMBAT O

Combat Orientation is Thursday at 0900Z/1330L at the Enduring Freedom Chapel. This is a mandatory briefing for all Air Force personnel assigned to Bagram Air Field. Newcomers must attend the briefing within a week of their arrival. Accountability is tracked and will be forwarded to the 1st Sergeants at the end of the week.

### COMBAT PUSH

Combat Push times are Monday, Wednesday and Friday in the Camp Cunningham Rec Tent from 0900L/0430Z to 1000L/0530Z. Services, Comm and PERSCO will be available to sign outprocessing checklists. Personnel must complete your Post Deployment Health Questionnaire on-line and pick up your medical records at Flight Medicine/Public Health before coming to Combat Push. For more information call 431-4409.

### ATTENTION ALL JUNIOR NCOS

The Bagram AF Route 5/6 meets Thursdays at 1800L/1330Z at Camp Cunningham’s Town Hall. The meetings are open to all staff sergeant selects, staff sergeants and tech sergeants. Contact Tech Sgt. Stephen DeWeese, 431-3212 or Tech Sgt. Charles Heywood, 431-2820 for more information.

### NEWS BRIEF SUBMISSIONS SHOULD BE SENT TO

[455aewpa@swa.army.mil](mailto:455aewpa@swa.army.mil) WITH THE SUBJECT LINE “NEWS BRIEFS” AND INCLUDE POC INFORMATION.