



BAGRAM NEWS EXPRESS

Start Right, Finish Strong

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Colonel Kwast takes reins of 455th AEW

By Staff Sgt. Jason Lake
455th Air Expeditionary Wing

Two colonels, who crossed paths as wing commanders of Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., nearly three years ago, crossed paths once again during a change of command ceremony at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, April 18.

Brig. Gen. Mike Holmes relinquished command of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing to Col. Steven Kwast after serving as the unit's commander for 13 months.

"I've been honored by the opportunity to serve along with the best people," General Holmes said to hundreds of Airmen standing in formation on Bagram's flightline. "You all found ways to say yes instead of reasons to say no. We've made the wing better with every Air Expeditionary Force cycle."

The voice of the general who had flown more than 80 combat missions in Afghanistan trembled as he uttered his final words to his Airmen before handing over the wing guidon to Colonel Kwast.

"I'll miss you and think of you always. Start right, finish strong," he said.



Air Force/Senior Airman Erik Cardenas

Col. Steven Kwast, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, speaks at his first commander's call to Airman at Bagram April 23. Colonel Kwast shared his expectations of Airmen during his tenure here. See next page for details.

Colonel Kwast, an F-15E Strike Eagle pilot who has flown more than 230 combat hours during Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Southern Watch and Enduring Freedom, also

took command of the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour-Johnson AFB from then Colonel Holmes in 2006.

"It's time for change at the 455th AEW," said Lt. Gen. Gary North, 9th Air

Force and U.S. Air Forces Central commander, who presided over the ceremony. "This is the fifth time we've had a new leader at Bagram. I'm no stranger to either of these warriors ... both have served under me at the 9th Air Force, but this time we're thousands of miles away in a war zone."

General North gave words of encouragement to Colonel Kwast who recently served as the Deputy Director of Requirements at Headquarters Air Combat Command at Langley Air Force Base, Va.

"[Colonel] Kwast, this upcoming year will be the highlight of your career," General North said as he stressed the importance of leading servicemembers on the front lines. "[Colonel Kwast] you are the right commander, you are the right leader, you are the right Airman to lead this wing," General North said. "Your task is simple. Continuously infuse the warrior ethos of excellence in everything you do. Integrate in a seamless fashion in the joint fight. Fly, fight and, as always, win."

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KWAST

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In his first address as the 455th AEW commander, Colonel Kwast asked Airmen to remember why they are thousands of miles away from friends and family.

“It’s an important time to connect the dots,” he said. “Every action you take, every day in this fight, contributes to something much greater than any one of our nations or services. [You are all part] of a global vision that peacemakers will rule this world and evil doers will never last. This is our challenge.”

In the few days since he arrived here April, Colonel Kwast said he has been impressed by what he has seen at Bagram.

“I’ve seen Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and coalition warriors who show a positive attitude and can-do spirit with humility ... an iron spine ... and fire in their eyes to fight.”

The 23-year Air Force veteran urged

Keys to Success

Below are four traits Colonel Kwast outlined for Airmen to follow in order to be successful.

Have Humility: Be first to admit mistakes and always ask self what you could have done better.

Be Noble: Be professional, treat everyone with the same amount of respect no matter what their job/rank is.

Be a Warrior: Take care of yourself physically by getting enough rest, eating healthy and working out on a daily basis. Ask yourself, “Do I really need to watch that movie for the tenth time, or should I go to the gym?”

Have Compassion: Get to know the Airmen you work with because in the heat of battle, you’ll be fighting for the lives of one another.

his Airmen to keep those characteristics and remain vigilant in spite of deployed life’s long work hours and sometimes monotonous nature.

“Remember, we are at war,” he said. “When you start feeling the numbness of daily behavior, stop, shake yourself and remind yourself that you are part of something great. You are part of something historians will talk about that

defines a different world. You are a key player right here, right now, today.”

The 455th AEW provides close air support, air mobility, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, combat search and rescue, aeromedical evacuation and electronic attack capabilities for U.S. and coalition forces at Bagram and Kandahar Air Field in Afghanistan. As commander of the Air Force’s only wing in Afghanistan, Colonel Kwast oversees more than 4,000 Airmen - including more than 1,200 Joint Expeditionary Tasking Airmen assigned to forward operating bases and sites throughout Afghanistan.

Since March 2008, the 455th AEW has conducted more than 20,000 combat close air support sorties, airlifted more than 95,000 passengers, employed more than 1 million pounds of ordnance, moved 66 million pounds of cargo and transported more than 3,500 medical patients safely. Additionally, the wing increased its unmanned aerial system presence in theater by 50 percent over the past year.



Air Force/Senior Airman Erik Cardenas

Col. Steven Kwast, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, receives his first salute from Airmen of the 455th AEW during the change of command ceremony April 18.



Tech. Sgt. Jedediah Smith, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron pararescueman, surveys the landscape for threats during a training mission in Northeastern Afghanistan April 20.

NY's finest return to where it all started 'so that others may live'

Story & photos by Staff Sgt. Jason Lake
455th Air Expeditionary Wing

While all Airmen assigned to rescue squadrons throughout the Air Force know and follow the motto "So that others may live," there is one rescue squadron, deployed to Afghanistan, that takes this personal.

"There is something that sets our unit apart from all the others," explained Senior Master Sgt. James "Mac" McAleavey, an HH-60 aerial gunner supporting Operation Enduring Freedom along with more than 75 other Airmen from the 101st Rescue Squadron from West Hampton Beach, N.Y. "Our unit is from the city where it all started ... New York City is home field for all of us."

Roughly half of the four aircrews deployed from the Air National Guard unit are either police officers or firefighters back home - including Senior Master Sgt. Glen Berg, an aerial gunner and firefighter who wears "FDNY" and "9-11, Never

Forget" patches on his body armor as a reminder why his unit is in Afghanistan.

"Maj. [Curtis] Green's fire house and the fire house I work for lost firefighters that day," explained Capt. Shaun Cullen, an HH-60 Pave Hawk pilot who also works full time as a firefighter back home. "I worked on Wall Street with an investing firm at the time and saw the explosions from the back side of my office."

The captain said one of the benefits of being in law enforcement or firefighting back home is that it's very similar in nature to providing combat search and rescue capabilities in Afghanistan.

"You never know what kind of situation you're going to get into," he explained. "You constantly have to be in an alert posture ... ready to go."

In the past seven years, the unit has deployed five times including one deployment to Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003 and two deployments to Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2005 and 2007. The unit's current five-month deployment here is slated to end next month.

"Combat search and rescue is a tough job because you don't want to put your skills to use. If you do, that means someone is having a bad day," explained Lt. Col. Eugene Sengstacken, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron commander here.

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Senior Master Sgt. Glen Berg, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, gets together his gear before a mission. Sergeant Berg is an aerial gunner for the HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters and a New York City firefighter back home. Some of the New York Guardsmen in the unit wear patches like this 9-11 patch as a reminder while they stand on alert to rescue downed pilots and ground troops wounded behind enemy lines.

RESCUE

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“When we get the call, everybody has their game on because we all know what’s at stake. It’s those times that you see how professional your people are and what they are willing to risk to get the job done.”

For Sergeant McAleavey, it’s easy to understand what’s at stake because his son recently graduated from the Army’s explosive ordnance disposal training to become an EOD technician. His son’s unit is slated to deploy to Afghanistan next year.

“It’s all about saving lives,” said the 26-year retired detective from Lindenhurst, N.Y. “If we save just one life in our entire

career, it was all worth it. With my son now serving in EOD, I would hope that a unit like ours would do the same for my son if he was wounded.”

But sometimes “Mac” admits their mission to save servicemembers is bittersweet.

“We’ve brought back people who didn’t make it,” he said. “But we brought them home for their families so they can have closure.”

To stay sharp when the alert calls are sparse, the team finds ways to fine tune their skill sets - whether flying training missions to deliver humanitarian supplies, or firing off the aerial guns on the firing range.

Tech. Sgt. Jedediah Smith, a seven-year veteran pararescuemen, visits the hospital here to brush up on his field medicine

techniques. He also trains some of the aircrew on basic techniques in case he is injured during a mission.

“It’s important that everyone has some basic medical skills, because nobody really knows who the patient is going to be,” said Sergeant Smith, who totes a little brown teddy bear from his four-year-old daughter’s school with him “pretty much everywhere” he goes.

The New York Guardsmen look forward to catching up with friends and family as crewmembers from the 56th Rescue Squadron at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, arrive next month.

But until they leave on the coveted rotator flight back home, the 101st RQS remains vigilant here “so that others may live.”



Capt. Tamar Hassan, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron co-pilot, trails behind the lead HH-60 Pave Hawk during a training mission April 20.



ABOVE: First Lt. Brent McCall, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron combat rescue officer, and Tech. Sgt. Jedediah Smith, 101st ERQS para-rescueman, load their gear for a training mission in Northeastern Afghanistan. In addition to an M-4 assault rifle, combat medical gear and body armor, Sergeant Smith also packs his four-year-old daughter's preschool class teddy bear. The New York Air National Guardsman brings the bear on all his missions and writes letters on behalf of the bear. "He pretty much goes everywhere I go," Sergeant Smith said.

ABOVE RIGHT: Lt. Col. Eugene Sengstacken, 101st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron commander, and Captain Hassan start up the engines on a HH-60 Pave Hawk before taking off.

RIGHT: A 101st RQS HH-60 Pave Hawk flies through the Hindu Kush mountain passes.

NEWS BRIEFS

NATO MEDALS: The NATO Medal typically takes approx. 90 days upon arrival for approval and distribution back to PERSCO. PERSCO has a spreadsheet posted to the SIPR public drive which you can view to see the status of your medal. If you notice any errors, please contact the following POCs: Staff Sgts. Melinda Rowe, Lauren Taylor or Master Sgt. Carey Lambert at 431-2070/4409 or email 445EMSG.PERSCO@afghan.swa.army.mil

GOING TDY: All Air Force members are required to in and out-process through PERSCO for TDYs, Emergency Leave or R&R Leave/Pass. The PAX terminal will not manifest you until they have documentation stamped from PERSCO. All personnel assigned to the 455th are required to complete the AOR Travel Authorization Memo for any type of TDY. Please direct questions to PERSCO, 431-4409/2070.

COMBAT O: Combat Orientation is Thursday at 0930Z/1400L at the Enduring Freedom Chapel. This is a mandatory briefing for all Air Force personnel assigned to Bagram Air Field. Accountability is tracked and will be forwarded to the first sergeants.

COMBAT PUSH: Combat Push hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday at Bldg. 700 from 0900L-1000L and from 2230L-2330L. Services and PERSCO will be available to sign outprocessing checklists. Personnel must complete their out-processing checklist entirely, complete their Post Deployment Health Questionnaire online and pick up their medical records at Flight Medicine/Public Health before coming to Combat Push. For more information call PERSCO at 431-4409.

NEWCOMERS INPROCESSING: All Air Force members are required to inprocess with PERSCO. The inprocessing will start your combat pay entitlements. If you have been in the AOR for at least 30 days and you are not receiving combat pay, visit Finance in the crow's nest tower on Camp Cunningham. If you know for a fact that you did not inprocess with PERSCO, please visit PERSCO located in Bldg. 700 near the passenger terminal. Call 431-2070/4409 for more information.

MEO CONTACT INFO: The Camp Cunningham Military Equal Opportunity Office at Bldg. 726 can be reached by calling 481-6226 or call the Air Force Discrimination/Sexual Harrassment Hotline at 1-866-229-7074.

EAGLE CASH: All deployed personnel (military, civilian and contractors) utilizing Air Force finance office services within the USCENCOM AOR are required to have an EagleCash Stored Value Card and highly encouraged to use it. Additionally, the Bagram Finance Office has set-up a full-service EagleCash Card Center at the Friday Bagram Bazaar for your use. Sign-up for your EagleCash Card today.

IMMUNIZATIONS: Are your immunizations up to date? Active duty members are required to stay current on all immunizations during their deployment. Report to your nearest medical treatment facility to check your status and get vaccinated. For questions, contact Task Force Medical Public Health.



Air Force/Senior Airman Erik Cardenas

AFCENT Band visits Bagram
Tech. Sgt. Jeff Saunders plays the saxophone for U.S. and coalition servicemembers at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, April 20. Sergeant Saunders is a band member with Sirocco, the U.S. Air Forces Central Expeditionary Band, which is touring the AFCENT area of operations. He and the other band members are deployed to Southwest Asia from the U.S. Air Forces in Europe Band at Sembach Air Base, Germany.