



# Behind the **BOOM**

Ammo Airmen Provide Firepower



*Photos—Capt. Ray Geoffroy; Story—TSgt Shawn McCowan; Video—SSgt Neal Uranga*



**The A-10 Thunderbolt II** is one of the primary fighting platforms in Operation Enduring Freedom. It uniquely combines the abilities of maintaining low speeds, high maneuverability at low altitudes, and overwhelming firepower into a rugged fighting machine.

But even the mighty aircraft affectionately known as the “Warthog” cannot perform its mission without the help of hard-working men and women who keep this “flying tank” both in the air and heavily armed.

Lt Col Scott Ritzel, 455th Expeditionary Maintenance Squadron commander, is acutely aware of the importance of his people’s missions.

“It takes an awful lot to get a combat-loaded aircraft above a troop and in contact. Somebody’s got to generate that kinetic power. That starts with ammo troops,” said Ritzel.

Like any cross-section of America, professionals assigned to Conventional Maintenance “Ammo” bring together a diverse series of personal stories that blend into a tightly-knit and highly effective unit.

Airman 1st Class John Tibbetts, a Manassas, Va. Native, is a munitions apprentice on his first deployment. He is part of a five-person “30mm Ammo Team” assigned to inspect, transfer and load the ammo used in the A-10’s imposing main gun. He and his team



*A1C John Tibbetts of Manassas, Va.*

process about three to four cans of ammo at a time, each holding 2,300 rounds.

Tibbetts attends college back in the United States, chasing his goal of becoming an expert in diplomacy, specializing in Asian studies. In the meantime, he says he is content to help the ammo team with a slightly less subtle form of “diplomacy.”

**— To learn about Munitions Systems jobs in the Air Force, click [HERE...](#)**

Back in the Cold War days of the 1980s and 1990s, the A-10 first began to turn heads as a new close air support aircraft. One of the Air Force servicemembers serving during that tense period was the father of SSgt Bryan Cheeks. Cheeks is now a munitions systems specialist deployed from Fort Smith, Ark. His desire to be part of this mission is directly connected to his memories with his father.

“I joined the Air Force to follow my father’s legacy. Seeing the example he set, and how proud he was to be part of the Air Force, I always wanted to serve like he did. He used to take me to his unit on Friday nights after school and homework. I learned what it was like to be part of the Air Force family,” said Cheeks.

He is happy that his sons appreciate what he does, and want to carry on the tradition. He says his 13-year-old wants to go to college and be an officer with munitions, and his 11-year-old already says he wants to work in the munitions field.

But his immediate family priority will be to get home on time for the arrival of



*SSgt Bryan Cheeks of Fort Smith, Ark.*

his newest family member; his first daughter.

“My wife and I are expecting a baby girl at the same time I’m scheduled to get home. So I’m hoping to be with my wife when our baby girl arrives,” said Cheeks.

While deployed, Cheeks is part of a

team that prepares and tests large munitions before they are delivered to an A-10 to load.

He said that he realizes their job may be a small one to some others, but it gives him, “An overwhelming sense of pride that what I do here, even though it’s a small part, allows our guys on the ground to get home safe and sound.”

One of Cheeks' co-workers both at home station and deployed, Airman 1st Class Mary Wiuff, also has family connections to military service. Her grandfather served in the Air Force, and her brother served in the Marines. But the Little Rock, Ark. native discovered that her personal drive to serve actually came from somewhere deeper.



*A1C Mary Wiuff of Little Rock, Ark.*

“I was working small job after small job back home. But I kept thinking, ‘I can’t live like this.’ I knew inside there was something more for me.

“My grandfather always told great stories about the Air Force. I spoke to recruiters, and the strangest thing happened. When I signed that dotted line, it felt like a weight was lifted off of me. I knew right away I was made to do this. I love serving and I love this job,” said Wiuff.

Wiuff married another Air Force member last July, but he was stationed in Japan. Not long after the wedding Wiuff was mobilized and deployed to Bagram, so the last time the newlyweds saw each other was January. She hopes he will be home when she gets there.

Apart from the separation from her new husband, Wiuff is happy to do her part of the big mission.

“There are a lot of people out there who need our help. This is my way of contributing to the people we’re trying to free, and to protect our own troops.

“I feel like this is my calling. It makes

me feel good that, even though I’m not out there, what I do here helps good people out there.”

Even in a mission focused on missiles, bombs, and 30mm explosive projectiles, the men and women of Conventional Maintenance work with hearts forged from the ideals of equality, freedom, and a sense of family—



**Want to see more Ammo  
Airmen at work?**

**Click [HERE](#) for  
Mission Video**

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Photo Slideshow**



"It takes an awful lot to get a combat loaded aircraft above a troop in contact... That starts with Ammo troops"

— Lt. Col. Scott Ritzel, 455 EMXS Commander

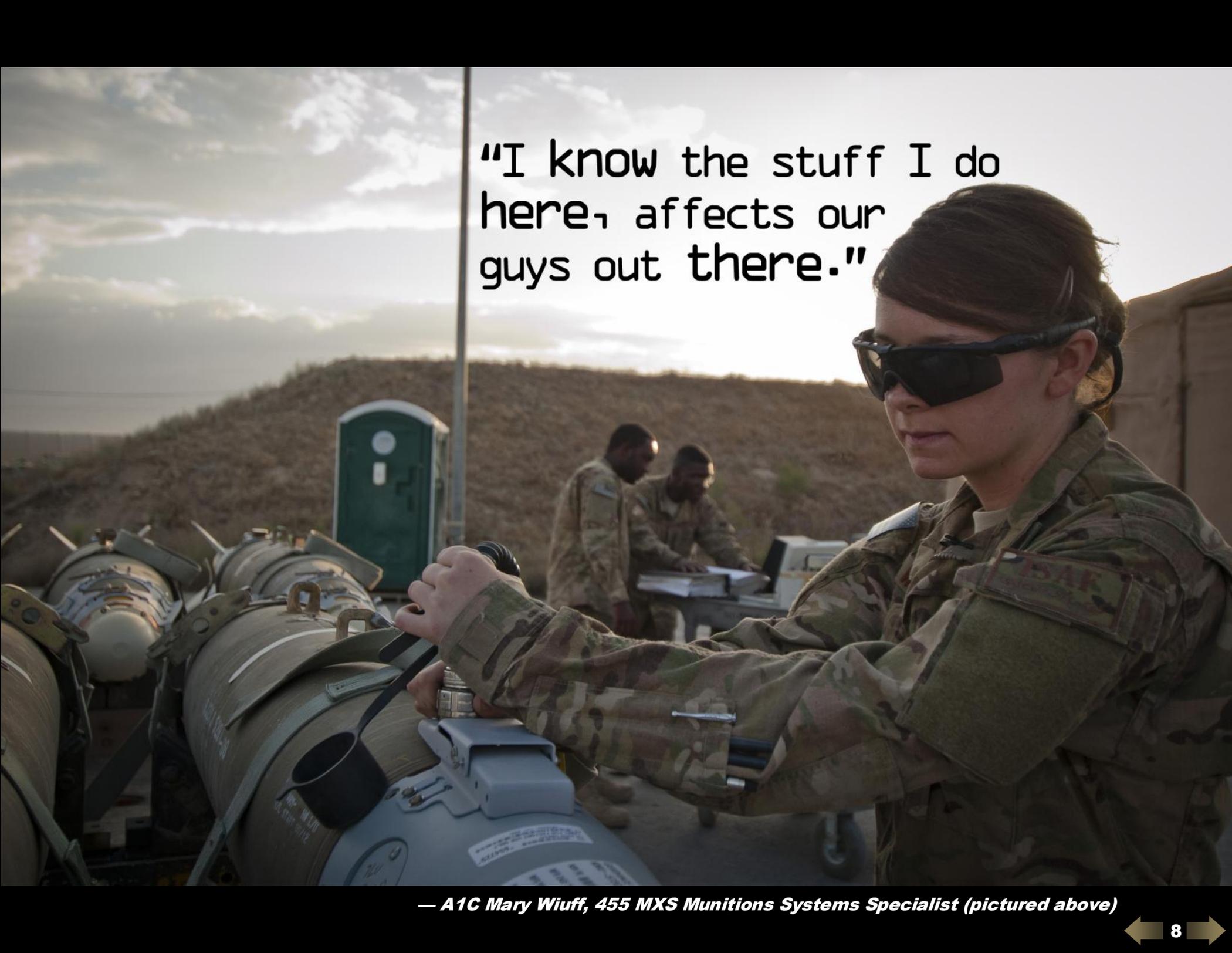


"Every bomb  
has its  
purpose  
& a major  
impact."

— TSgt Jessica Evans, 455 MXS Munitions Systems Specialist (pictured above)



*— To learn about Munitions Systems jobs in the Air Force, click [HERE...](#)*

A photograph of A1C Mary Wiuff, a 455 MXS Munitions Systems Specialist, in a desert environment. She is wearing a camouflage uniform, sunglasses, and is focused on adjusting a large, cylindrical munitions component. In the background, two other personnel are working at a table, and a green portable toilet is visible. The sky is bright with some clouds.

"I know the stuff I do here, affects our guys out there."

*— A1C Mary Wiuff, 455 MXS Munitions Systems Specialist (pictured above)*



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"The munitions that we build  
are allowing the guys on  
the ground... to be able  
to go home to their families,  
**safe and sound.**"



*—SSgt Bryan Cheeks, 455 MXS Munitions Systems Specialist (pictured above)*