Defenders on the Line

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

The population of Bagram Airfield represents a true "melting pot" of the ongoing international effort to support stability in Afghanistan.

Servicemembers from America's four major military branches, military members from several NATO member nations, civilians, and even Afghans, all work together toward the common goal of ensuring the nation remains free and secure.

The thousands of men and women from around the world who call "BAF" their temporary home depend on an effective security force to keep them safe. It might be easy to imagine such a major responsibility belonging to an elite special operations unit. In actuality, Bagram's safety rests in the capable arms of U.S. Air Force security forces teams deployed from Active Duty, Reserve, and Air National Guard units from all over the world.

While the mission may be challenging and complex, both leadership and security forces individuals agree that the current team is ready for the trials their job may bring.

Lt.Col. Thomas Sherman, 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron commander and Bagram Defense Force commander, says the plan for this "blended" band of "Defenders" has been in the works for years, but is being expertly executed today.

"This operation is a great actualization of the ideals that began with Operation Safeside in Vietnam in the 1960s. Enemy forces can not touch us in the air. We have an incredible amount of air superiority. Our adversaries realized they need to get those birds while they were in the nest. Having Air Force defenders responsible for that is the best way we can accomplish that mission. We have Air Force defenders working in an integrated base concept both from the source to the perimeter and throughout the Bagram security zone. Air Force defenders ensure Bagram Airfield is protected," said Sherman.

He credits their effectiveness to the professionalism of the diverse team of defenders who work for him, from personnel management to the newest patrol member.

A1C Kory Caldwell, who lives in Dayton, Ohio and is deployed from the Ohio Air National Guard's 179th Airlift Wing, spends his days standing guard at one of Bagram's many Entry Control Points. He did not hesitate to echo the positive attitude Sherman refers to.

A1C Kory Caldwell, 455 ESFS

"I love this. Since I first joined, I always wanted to deploy. This has definitely been an experience of a lifetime. As a little kid, I saw camo and guns and I just thought it was cool. Then as I get older, I knew I wanted to do something for my country. Now I can see it means more than that. If we weren't here people back home couldn't do what they do. My favorite part of the job is camaraderie and meeting new people from different places," said Caldwell.

He was also quick to point out that individuals from varied backgrounds at units all over the U.S. truly work together seamlessly.

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“I feel very integrated here. You sometimes hear stories about active duty, guard and reserve…but it actually works very well here. Everyone meshes together very well, side by side, and it works for everyone.”

SrA Ryan Rucker, 455 ESFS

Some of the local populace works on Bagram during the day, which is why SrA Ryan Rucker, a reservist deployed from the 514th Security Forces Squadron at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, monitors one of Bagram’s special security measures; an array of X-Ray scanners used to protect Bagram. Rucker and his active duty co-workers make sure any type of contraband, weapons, or any unauthorized items are discovered before workers enter the base.

Not only does the Teaneck, N.J. native, work with active duty regularly, but his team also coordinates with an Afghan counterpart if anything looks suspicious. Rucker said he appreciates the opportunity to work side-by-side with Afghans and active duty Airmen.

“We get all different types of backgrounds out here. I like knowing that active duty and reservists can work together. We all get along with no issues. Back home I do my job one weekend out of the month, but I have to know my job as proficiently as he does. Once we get into this environment, we all have the same training, and do the same jobs,” said Rucker.

Some of the Defenders’ responsibilities reach “outside the wire.” “Mike” teams regularly patrol the local area around Bagram.

Many of their missions appear to be closer to community relations than the perceived traditional base defense. But these missions protect the Bagram family in a different way; by building positive relations with Afghans who live near the base.

A security mission like “Mike” teams was a perfect fit for SrA Arsenio De la Cruz.

The Corona, Cal., native says he wanted to experience new things on a different side of the world away from what he called “secluded to the world” he knew back home.

“Being deployed in Afghanistan, I’ve got to witness a different side of life. Outside here, they didn’t get to grow up with what I grew up with… it’s a real eye-opener. I didn’t really expect to see that coming here,” said De la Cruz.

De la Cruz said he’s happy bring his individual strengths and personality to the team.

“It’s like playing a sport. You’re coming together, meeting new people and finding your weaknesses and strengths. You pull together and work it all out. I’ve never thought that I’m in a different unit, so I’m better than anyone. We’re all the same here, all in the same mission, and we all work it out just fine with each other.”

De la Cruz said he’ll take home his deployment experiences and grow from them.

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SrA Arsenio De la Cruz , 455 ESFS

"I learned not take things for granted. This makes you feel proud to be serving your country and making a change in everyone's life, even if it's just giving a kid some food or candy. It's all about being grateful for what you have."

Once the sun sets over Afghanistan, base protection continues along the fence line. Alabama native A1C Kirsten Hamilton is a member of a perimeter response team. Deployed from Altus AFB, she and her co-workers ensure outside threats remain clear of the base fence line.

A common event that can cause anxiety for Hamilton and her team is when unfamiliar vehicles approach Bagram's entry gates, but she says she understands the importance of her job, and that makes it worth the tension.

"This can be stressful, but I like it because I know everyone is able to sleep because of what I do. It feels like I'm actually doing something with my life," said Hamilton.

One of Hamilton's co-workers is SSgt Elijah Langhorne, a perimeter response team leader from Leesville, La. Although his job is centered on protecting people on base, he finds his dealings with those outside Bagram even more satisfying.

"I think interaction with the locals, both positive and negative, is the most rewarding thing about this job. We see locals asking for our help, dealing with mines, insurgents… things like that. It's nice to see the positives happen, because it lets us know we're making a difference. Seeing locals respecting us for us coming here, recognizing that we're trying to help. We're not trying to be a disruptive force here, even though we're completely alien to their lifestyle and what they have around them," said Langhorne.

But Langhorne says his greatest personal reward comes from an overall understanding of what his diverse blend of "Defenders" contribute to the big picture in their own lives, and the lives of those in Afghanistan and back home.

Langhorne admits that not every day is a good day in his job, but he knows how to keep it all in perspective.

"The low parts help you appreciate the high parts. And there are a lot of both. But either way, right now I can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing."

His thoughts seemed to echo those of the rest of his squadron; something one might expect when a team comes together as successfully as the Defenders have.

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—A1C Kory Caldwell, 455 ESFS

—SrA Vincente Carter (right), 455 ESFS

—A1C Kirsten Hamilton (right), 455 ESFS

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