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## Warthog

Michael Yon



**All photos in this dispatch made on March 1, 2010, at Kandahar Airfield.**

**Kandahar, Afghanistan**  
**23 March 2010**

The mission required crossing a bridge that had been blown up a couple hours earlier by a suicide car bomber. The attacker hit a convoy from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, killing American soldier Ian Gelig. Now with a hole in the bridge and recovery operations underway, our mission was cancelled. So I called the Air Force to see if they were busy. Yes, it turns out, the Air Force is busy every day, but Captain Kristen Duncan took me down to the ramp where the A-10 “Warthogs” are parked.



**Lt Col Tim Eddins adjusts g-suit.**

Two pilots were gearing up to fly from Kandahar over to neighboring Helmand to support a British unit. The A-10 “Warthogs” are slow—not supersonic—but fantastically agile. The aircraft dart like dragonflies and seem to change direction against the laws of physics. The A-10s can turn so fast that they can break the laws of healthy physiology, and can cause a pilot to pass out and crash his airplane. And so pilots wear G-suits to help counter adverse fluid dynamics.



The helmets offer no ballistic protection. Helmets that ground troops wear can stop bullets, and have done so in Iraq and Afghanistan on many occasions, usually knocking out the wearer. I remember a Marine Major in Mosul who got shot in the head. He said it knocked him out cold. He said it wasn't pleasant getting shot in the head, but he was downtown in Mosul back in the action when I asked about it. Army Lieutenant Colonel Terry Jamison also got shot in the helmet in the same city, Mosul. When I asked LTC Jamison about getting shot while flying his Kiowa Warrior helicopter, he said the bullet somehow missed his head but ventilated his helmet. (I saw the helmet.) Pilots wear light helmets because of the hard turns, plus some high-G accidents can cause neck injuries.





**Lieutenant Colonel Eric Murphy is an A-10 pilot from Baltimore.**

Lt Col Murphy flies with the 104<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Fighter Squadron from the Maryland National Guard. In his day job, “Captain” Eric Murphy is a commercial pilot who flies A320s but today he’s not flying British tourists traveling within the United States. He’s going to Helmand Province to cover the British “Royal Welsh.” I remembered some Royal Welsh from Iraq. There had been much fighting. A lot of killing that went both ways. They had been **Men of Valor**.

As Lt Col Murphy crawled in, I wished him luck in covering the British, but didn’t say that some of those British soldiers are my personal friends. It was good to see the A-10s heading out there. The Brits appreciate it.



### **Flare dispensers under each wing.**

A-10s have more tricks than Harry Potter, such as the flares designed to lure heat-seeking missiles away from the engines. Over these battlefields, pilots often pop the flares as “We see you” warnings to the enemy. If the enemy is in the open and no civilians are around, they are unlikely to get a friendly flare warning, but sometimes it’s better to hold off on the big weapons; the enemy might be fighting from a built-up area.



Today, Lt Col Murphy's 30mm cannon is loaded with 1,150 rounds. The 30mm can destroy tanks, but believe it or not, typically will not penetrate the walls around Afghan homes. When the 30mm fires, it's almost unbelievable. The bullets don't fly in a laser-like stream, but sort of spray in a lethal mist, as if the cannon is shot-painting a swath with huge bullets. If the enemy is in the open, the cannon is like a weapon of mass destruction. When people are hit with M-16 bullets, the wound is often more like a couple small holes, but when bodies get hit with weapons this large, they fly in pieces.

A-10 cannons are tilted down so that the pilot can fly level while strafing. This is important: In Mosul, in 2004, an F-14 was strafing downtown after a massive truck bomb in December and many other bad surprises (I was not there), and the pilot told me he was fixated on the target. Since the F-14 cannon is tilted up for "Top Gun" air combat, the pilot had to nose down the F-14 and was diving straight into the target and nearly crashed. The hard turn to avoid crashing damaged his aircraft and the pilot had difficulty landing on the aircraft carrier later that night. Since the A-10 gun is tilted down, it can fly level and strafe without accidentally crashing into the target.





Lt Cols Tim Eddins and Eric Murphy climb up the telescoping ladder into their jets and go through one of many checklists. Watching Air Force missions and all the checklists is reminiscent of watching space launches. Checklist after checklist of obscure terms. Occasionally they say things normal people might recognize, like “brakes.”



Meanwhile, highly trained ground crews check, check, and recheck. And then check again. They checked so many times that it was hard to keep up.





Each of the two Warthogs carried 8x BLU 19 IR (infrared) illumination flares, which can be used to help helicopters land on dark nights. Our special operations helicopters don't need any ambient light to fly in the dark. They could fly in a cave if the cave were big enough. But most of U.S. helicopters need some light to see the ground, and on nights too dark to fly (called "red illum" by the aviators), someone needs to light up the landing zone. The helicopters can turn on their own IR lights, but it can be preferable to have artillery, mortars, or, say, Warthogs illuminate for you.

Each Warthog also carried 7x 2.75" White Phosphorous marking rockets; 2x GBU 38 satellite-guided 500lb bombs; 1x GBU 12 500lb LGB. [GBU = Guided Bomb Unit; LGB = Laser Guided Bomb.]

Just before the aircraft goes to the runway, they arm the 30mm cannon (you have to stand out of the way just in case), and all the strange weapons. The weapons specialists pull out the red tags and store the tags in the aircraft.



**For the ground crews and pilots, mistakes are unacceptable. Period.**



**Lt Col Tim Eddins: seems like he loves his job.**

During his day job, Lt Col Eddins pilots Boeing 777 jets for United to places like China. He said he likes traveling to China.

(Murphy and Eddins both fly for United. It's a comfort knowing so many military pilots are up front when your loved ones fly; remember when former Air Force pilot Chesley Sullenberger flew his A320 through a flock of birds and landed in the Hudson River? He got everyone out alive.)



**Red tags were off: pilots Murphy and Eddins were ready to roll.**



**They taxied to the nearby runway.**





The Warthogs had to wait for a Reaper to roll by. No telling where Mr. iRobot would fly to. Do these go to Pakistan? I have no idea, but it seems like you can't read the news without seeing where these robots have hit more terrorists. There was a time when the enemy thought terror was a one-way street.

This place has gotten to be like a hornet's nest of Predators and Reapers. A couple years ago, you'd see them every day, but now you can't turn around without seeing an iRobot Terminator buzzing around to land or disappearing into the sunset or sunrise.

UAVs are very useful, but come with sharp limitations. They are great hammers when you need a hammer, but they're still hammers when you need a wrench. For example, UAVs can't guard bridges against suicide bombers. They have limited, pinprick firepower other than for small targets. They are useless in poor weather. UAVs are but one sort of tool in a great big tool chest.



**US aircraft in Iraq and Afghanistan nearly always fly in pairs (or more), though some Coalition partners will fly in single helicopters.**

Pilots Eddins and Murphy rolled out to the taxiway and got in queue for takeoff. At the front of the queue are a couple commercial jets, then the Reaper, then some kind of electronic warfare machine, then Murphy and Eddins in their Warthogs. This is just a pinhole view of Kandahar Airfield. There are more helicopters here than in *Apocalypse Now*. Captain Kristen Duncan and I watched dozens and dozens of aircraft take off and land. Name it. Everything from 747s to Stealth UAVs come in here. Afghan, British, Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Belgian—the list keeps going.

Eddins and Murphy finally rolled away and took off to cover the British Royal Welsh.



**The sun set but the war kept going.**





Later that night, Captain Duncan and I went back to the A-10s. Lt Cols Eddins and Murphy returned with all their bombs and bullets. Two other Warthogs were prepared to slip into the night.



**Everything was checked.**



**Rechecked and rechecked.**



**Finally it was time.**



The Warthogs flew away under a big moon, which leaves us with one final thought. When the moon is this bright, you can use a signal mirror to alert the Warthog pilots of your position. Something to keep in mind.

*Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael's dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation.*



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