



The Value of

Letters from the Front

First Lt. Josh V. Barlow, '08.

Editor's Note: Chance encounters are often a pleasant surprise in the Air Force. With USAFA graduates deployed all across the world, they have the welcome occasion of running into one another from time to time. In some cases they are classmates; in other cases, their class years are separated by decades. But in any case, the graduates of this institution all share the common bonds of kinship and excellence engrained at the Academy. This is the story of one first lieutenant and the role the Academy played in preparing him for the challenges of deployment.

A proud member of the Class of 2008, I currently serve as a special tactics officer (STO) team leader at the 22nd Special Tactics Squadron at Joint Base Lewis McChord—JBLM, formerly known as McChord AFB, Washington. I began the combat control (CCT) pipeline in the fall of 2008 and finished in the fall of 2010. My fellow graduates Alex Nell and Spencer Reed, also Class of 2008, finished the two-year pipeline around the same time. Yet another of our classmates, Kevin Epstein, entered the parallel but still very different career field of combat rescue officer (CRO).

I am currently deployed as a joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) attached to an Army Special Forces team in a remote location in Afghanistan. My responsibilities during this deployment include working with anything and everything that flies—from helicopter landing zones and aerial re-supply working drop zones, to controlling med evacs and collecting intelligence via reconnaissance aircraft—to our personal favorite: employing bombs, rockets, missiles and guns on the enemy via any aircraft capable of decimating the Taliban.

As a team leader (or “Flight Commander” as the Air Force knows it) I oversee one of three teams—Silver Team—at the 22 STS. I have a senior enlisted team sergeant, Chris Grove, who ran the entire airfield operation and air traffic control during the earthquake relief efforts in Haiti.

Grove also has numerous medals for his actions in combat, making him an invaluable group member. He runs the day-to-day operations of the team while I oversee the big picture; my main concern is to make sure the men are taken care of. Together we run a team of about 25 enlisted CCTs and work to ensure the men are current on the multitude of capabilities that are required of a combat controller. Our unit, commanded by Lt. Col. Mike Flatten, is responsible for ensuring the combat controllers are deployable at all times to any environment, any place, any time. I work in a unit surrounded by excellence, and I am privileged and honored to take part in giving everything I can to enable the heroes at our unit to do their job.

The combat controller mission statement is our creed. Every CCT has it committed to memory. And to heart. *“The mission of a combat controller is to deploy by the most feasible means available into combat and non-permissive environments. Combat controllers are special tactics operators who establish assault zones while simultaneously providing air traffic control, fire support and command and control communications in the joint arena. Additionally, combat controllers expertly employ all-terrain vehicles, amphibious vehicles, weapons and demolitions. First there!”*

Bomb attacks are a common occurrence at our location in Afghanistan. We recently had a local Afghan National Police officer get seriously injured in an IED attack and we treated his wounds immediately.

Previous page: Afghan National Police Officer as he was brought to the aid station post-IED blast. Barlow reports sighting the IED blast go off from the roof of his compound. Bomb attacks near the base are a daily phenomenon.

Compassion



I called in a med evac for him, and when the helicopter landed, one of my mentors—1st Lt. Chris Leonhardt from the Class of 2007—stepped off the helo to accept the patient. Our mini reunion there amid the dusty storm of the helicopter rotors brought back memories of my time at the Academy.

Remembering USAFA, the lessons learned from my classmates who mentored me from basic training to graduation as well as my academic instructors, my AOCs, my teammates in wrestling and my teammates in preparation for this career field have been invaluable. I cannot point to one person as the ultimate mentor, but there is something to be learned from absolutely everyone I've encountered. I was an intercollegiate athlete as a doolie, and the battle to balance academics, military responsibilities and sports (and also sleep on occasion) is an immense challenge to put on the shoulders of a recent high school graduate. The struggles I endured at the Academy—especially some of the lower-visibility programs such as Phase 0 (formerly known as mini-BUD/S) and the Sandhurst Team—have made me a better officer in my career field today. When you suffer and train together with a group of people, a bond is created that simply doesn't exist at any regular college—be it with classmates, teammates or squadron-mates. When you go through a school that over-prepares you as the Academy does, you will be more than ready to accept the challenges beyond graduation.

Move forward in time to Nowhere, Afghanistan, as we prepare to pass on our injured man to Chris and his boys—I'm taken back to my cadet days when Chris and his classmates were stuffing me underwater for survival training and had us doing

24 hour plus events in the freezing, snowy woods of the Academy in February. It's just insane to see how far we have all come.

In Basic Cadet Training we were told repeatedly that we would not make it through alone, and that was spot-on. To this day I am in debt to my classmates who had painstakingly invested their own personal time on a regular basis to walk me through my academic issues. Years later, during my Air Force career, I have had some of my guys struggle in some areas, be it personal life, physical fitness or competency. Thanks to my fellow cadets, my Academy experiences have given me the insight and compassion for my men I would not otherwise have had.

We make the greatest strides when someone invests his own personal time in us to help us along and ensure our success. My wrestling teammates and my squadron-mates helped me in academics. Additionally, my aforementioned upper classmate, Chris, went out of his way to make sure that the unpleasant training we were undergoing was in preparation for a successful Air Force Special Operations career field that was to come after graduation. I would be remiss if I did not also mention the support of those around me in my communities of faith, my wife, LaNee,' and my family. My mom was always there to uplift me while I was at the Academy with words and care packages, and my wife took on that role after graduation as I went through the rigorous CCT pipeline.

Our graduates are spread across the world, and I have run into fellow Zoomies at every base where I have been TDY, to include Keesler, Lackland, Hurlburt, Eglin, Pope, McChord, Fairchild, Nellis



Far left: The combat rescue crew works with medics to transition to the heli pad. Combat rescue officer 1st Lt. Chris Leonhardt, '07, (left, helmet/assault rifle) brings the medical staff up to speed on the patient's condition. Right: 1st Lt. Josh Barlow, '08, rushes out to meet a combat rescue helicopter crew only to run into his Academy mentor Lt. Leonhardt

and Creech. In Afghanistan, since I've been in-country alone, I have made contact with friends who are pilots from the MC-12 Huron, U-28 and AC-130 Hercules. As a recent example, I ran into a 2007 Academy grad at the camp in Kandahar—who was my intramural boxing instructor—and he let me jump on board for a live night mission without any hesitation. I have maintained contact with my friends at the Academy and, in fact, had what felt like a Class of 2008 reunion at my own wedding.

Although I have mentioned a lot in the realm of suffering from my time at the Academy, it was honestly one of the best experiences of my life. It is so much more valuable to have fun with your boys with whom you have shared experiences. I would take a bullet for any one of my brothers I graduated with without hesitation. I had an absolute blast at the Academy, and I would not trade my experience for the world.

In light of all the bad news we tend to receive during war time, it's nice to hear of the occasional success story. Regarding the Afghan National Police officer our unit evacuated from the IED blast, we got word that the actions of our Special Forces medics and the subsequent care received from the Air Force combat rescue officer and para-rescuemen saved his life. I can't think of a better picture of joint operations than Army Special Forces medics immediately treating a patient, an Air Force combat controller coordinating the med evac, and the Air Force rescue community taking on the patient to save his life. ▣

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