



# THUNDERBOLTS

Lt. Col. Millen, '90, leads A-10 squadron to 10,000 flight hours and 2,500 sorties in 6-month Afghanistan tour

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**M**ore than 10,000 flight hours and 2,500 sorties marked the closing stages of a six-month tour for the members of the 354th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron on New Year's Day, 2010.

The A-10 Thunderbolt II squadron, based in southern Afghanistan, was able to save the lives of countless ground forces because of faster reaction times. Air Force Lt. Col. Michael Millen, '90, the 354th EFS commander, heads up the group. "A lot of our focus is Regional Command-South, from Helmand," he explains. "Our aircraft are designed for close-air support. The A-10 does close air support (CAS) better than any other airplane in the world, and it puts us much closer to the fight than if we were at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan. We are much closer to our work, and it allows us more time actually doing the job than traveling to and from it. Even if we're not able to employ or provide the firepower to engage the enemy, they will stop shooting while we're there. It doesn't sound like much, but if our presence enables guys to take off their body armor and eat lunch, then that's what we do."

A combined effort between the Army and Air Force, the squadron from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., which

deployed in July 2009, flew sorties while spearheading new data link communications. This technology allows pilots to engage their targets more accurately than ever before. It works by providing a situational awareness data link into the tactical awareness display in the cockpit. The system has the capability of geospatially locating friendly ground units that have an Enhanced Position Location Reporting System. These Blue Force Trackers use GPS to give pilots the big picture on the locations of their allied ground units.

All of the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division vehicles, and even many of their personnel can be seen on the pilot's situational awareness displays in the cockpit. Until recently, pilots could only view units on the ground or airplanes in the sky on two separate systems. Time spent flipping between the two meant time not focused on the mission.

The situational awareness data link, or SADL, which is also in some older model F-16 Fighting Falcons, has been used since the A-10C was developed. Moving a step forward, Army Capt. Jared Cox, assigned to 5-2 SBCT, was the catalyst in developing the combined air and ground picture, providing A-10 pilots with the ability to

see nearby aircraft and ground components simultaneously.

Lt. Col. Millen recalls his experiences with the new technology. "December 26 (2009), working just 60 miles from here, I went out and began talking with the joint terminal attack controller about a convoy that he had outside the wire, and I was able to find him in a matter of seconds because they had an EPLRS-based system. It was a Stryker Brigade element and we found them in about 10 seconds. It would have taken us approximately 5 to 10 minutes to find them the old way, corresponding coordinates over the radio and looking for them on the roads. With the SADL system that Captain Cox has set up, we were able to find them in seconds."

Still in its infancy, Captain Cox's data link picture has a way to go until more players are linked into the air-ground design; but after six months in the field supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, the groundwork is there.

"Captain Cox began preparing for this over a year ago," Millen explains, "and then he managed to set up the data link architecture so that it would feed both the ground picture and the air picture right in to our cockpits. We had never trained at



that level until we got here—having only the air picture back in the states—but it’s been a phenomenal addition to the suite of tools we have in the A-10C.”

The value in combining the systems was not lost on the Army captain’s chain of command, who gave him the autonomy to run the program. Captain Cox is currently working to link 16 players—F-15E Strike Eagles, F-16s and many command and control platforms—to see the same air, ground atmospheric.

At home station, approximately 24 jets per squadron will normally fly 7,000 hours in a year. While deployed, the 354th EFS Airmen, with half the number of airplanes, flew more than 10,000 hours in six-months. Approaching 2,500 sorties, that is more than 400 sorties a month, which is 210 percent the rate at home.

The commander attributed that success rate to the maintainers who are also deployed from Davis-Monthan AFB. “They’ve done amazing things with these airplanes,” he says. “This is a 30-year-old jet, and if you look, we have the same fully mission capable rate as the unmanned aircraft—which are 30 years newer—that’s a testament to our maintainers. We bring the best people we can find, and they’re

the best people I’ve seen deployed, and it’s a tough environment.”

The environment is extreme; from the fine, talcum-like sand in the barren deserts to the high-elevations of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Temperatures range from below freezing to 120 degrees. It’s 24-hours-a-day of hard labor.

Senior Master Sgt. John Russell is the 451st Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron lead production superintendent. “The guys turning the wrenches really know what’s going on out there,” he explains, “and that’s what it comes down to. Those guys have never backed down. It doesn’t matter what type of weather, hot or cold, because they know they’ve got to get the aircraft in the air to protect the guys on the ground. That motivates them to do it right.”

Sergeant Russell said the main issues they ran into were engine problems. “It is very difficult to keep all the sorties going for the amount of hours they’re flying. Within a 48-hour period we changed eight engines, which is outstanding for these guys to put those aircraft back into the fight.”

The A-10 can employ a wide variety of conventional munitions, including general-purpose bombs, cluster bomb units, laser-guided bombs, joint direct attack

munitions, wind-corrected munitions dispenser, AGM-65 Maverick and AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles, rockets, illumination flares, and the GAU-8/A 30mm cannon, capable of firing 3,900 rounds per minute to defeat a wide variety of targets.

From July through December 2009, the squadron employed approximately 36,915 rounds of 30mm, 104 white-phosphorus rockets, eight MK-82s, nine GBU-12s and 78 GBU-38 JDAMs (all 500-lb. bombs), and one AGM-65E laser-guided Maverick missile. That’s about \$3.75 million worth of munitions.

To the ground forces, those munitions are well worth the cost. When Combat Outpost Keating came under attack Oct. 3, 2009, the fighter squadron Airmen changed their entire schedule. While Colonel Millen was asleep, his “smart captains” and “smart majors” took control, realizing the weather was getting bad and A-10s would soon be needed. When the Combined Air Operations Center battle director called, they were ready to launch.

“We launched four early in the day,” Millen recalls, “and they maintained presence all day over Keating. Then we launched four more at sunset and flew all night. There were a lot of airplanes (both Army and Air Force)



Previous page, left: The A-10 Thunderbolt at cruising speed (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Melanie Norman) Left: Morning Sun awaits the early mission. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Greg L. Davis) Right: Two A-10 Thunderbolt IIs flown by Lt. Col. Michael Millen, '90, and Col. John Cherrey taxi down the runway after completing 10,000 hours of flying during a six-month deployment Jan. 1, 2010, at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Dayton Mitchell)

dedicated to this effort. There were a lot of people involved and not all of them could talk to each other. Our guys spent a lot of time overhead assigning tasks, sorting out who was doing what and providing information to the ground commanders involved. That's the day we flew the most sorties; we had eight jets airborne at one point, with two on alert. We flew 100 hours in a 24-hour period. All the while, our maintainers never slowed down."

Their abilities were first tested shortly after deploying when a re-supply convoy was ambushed on July 29, 2009. The ground forces were attacked, taking a lot of effective fire with several casualties. "Somebody needed to show up and take charge of the airborne piece, which is what our guys did," Millen recalls. "Two good, young captains went out and sorted it out. They attacked enemy positions as the ambushers were firing down at our convoy. The A-10s protected the convoy while the 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron proceeded to get guys evacuated in helicopters. That went on for several hours. We launched two more A-10s to do that, and again, our guys were pushing sorties out that weren't on the schedule, just taking airplanes out the door and fixing them and getting them going."

During the operation, one of the helicopters took enough small-arms fire to cause a hard-landing one-quarter mile from the ambush site. The 354th EFS Airmen launched another four airplanes to protect the convoy as casualties were transferred to another aircraft, and all the ground forces were safely cleared out.

"That was a good day," Millen remembers, "because they did protect that convoy until they could get the situation settled down and get everybody safely out of there and back down to Kandahar." Despite the ambush, heavy fire and damaged helicopter, the three U.S. casualties and HH-60G Pave Hawk aircrews survived the attack.

### **Young, yet ready**

When the A-10 group flew from Tucson, Ariz., to Kandahar, Afghanistan, Colonel Millen had more flight hours in the Thunderbolt than all five of his wingmen combined. The lead pilot in the second cell only had about 500 flight hours. Millen had just surpassed his 3,000 flight hour-milestone Dec. 26, 2009.

"It's been amazing to watch," Millen says fondly. "It was a very young squadron. Guys here stepped up and I've been phenomenally impressed with everyone along the

way. The maintainers have been absolutely great with any situation—for election day, Forward Operating Base Keating, the convoy ambush—in all those cases we walked across the hall and said, we need more jets, and every time we've launched two more and prepared two more. It's not easy, and it means taking an airplane that you may have been working on and maybe you had scheduled for something else, and then put the whole thing back together and get it on the schedule in a matter of minutes. That part has been amazing."

The squadron will be returning to Tucson soon. The commander, selected for Naval War College, relinquished command Feb. 19, 2010, after leading the squadron for 27 months.

"For me personally," Millen says proudly, "I hate the thought of giving up command, but I'm giving command to a fantastic guy who will do great things in the squadron. I'd do it all again tomorrow. It's been a good ride, and commanding this squadron has been the greatest challenge, and the most rewarding thing on the planet." ■