

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT GENERAL GARY NORTH,
COMMANDER, 9TH AIR FORCE AND U.S. FORCES CENTRAL, SHAW AIR FORCE BASE, SOUTH
CAROLINA, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE:
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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, 1 April, 2009.

My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary
of Defense for Public Affairs and I'll be moderating the call today. A note to
the bloggers on the line. Clearly state -- excuse me -- your organization
you're with prior to asking your question.

Today, our guest is Air Force Lieutenant General Gary North who, since
late 2005, has served as the Combined Forces Air Component Commander or CFAC of
U.S. Central Command.

In this capacity, Lieutenant General North has been overseeing the air
war in Afghanistan, along with all air operations in Iraq and other areas of
the Central Command sphere. He is also the 9th Air Force Commander. Though he
wears this hat, for this Roundtable, he'll be speaking under the CFAC hat.

Without further adieu, sir, I'm going to turn it over to you. The floor
is yours if you'd like to start with an opening statement.

GEN. NORTH: Great. Thanks very much and good morning to everyone. Of
course, I'm in the AOR and, so it's early evening here. Just a short correction,
I took my current position in February of 2006, not late 2005.

As the Combined Forces Air Component Commander for General Dave
Petraeus and as the Air Component Commander -- one of four component commanders
that work for him -- as stated, I am responsible for the air campaign for both
Iraq and Afghanistan to both the commanders of the MNFI in Iraq and then U.S.
forces Afghanistan and ISTAF in Afghanistan.

It is a discussion of the role of air power in Afghanistan that I
believe that you want to talk about today. And so, collectively, our airmen
from all services and coalition partners are doing incredible work every day
over the skies of Afghanistan.

We basically run several mission steps and I'll just highlight them and
then let you go from where you would like to on that, primarily, armed over

watch or close air support with a variety of manned and unmanned airplanes, both fighters, bombers and unmanned aerial vehicles. We don't call them drones as they're sometimes misnamed in various articles. They're unmanned aerial vehicles and we have high-tier, tier one all the way down to hand-held unmanned aerial vehicles.

Our ISR platforms provide a variety of strategic to tactical level intelligence. It ranges, obviously, from overhead satellite all the way down to small platforms close to the ground. But we fly a variety of those from throughout the CENTCOM AOR and of course a variety of airlift because this is a logistical, major effort particularly to maintain and sustain combat operations and personnel on the ground.

So we fly both tactical and strategic lift in our C-17s, C-130s, and as well, coalition airplanes of different sizes and types to move both personnel and equipment around the battle space. These aircraft also do air drop because in Afghanistan a large methodology of resupply to our forces in isolated forward operating bases and co-located operating bases are by air drop.

Last year, the coalition forces air dropped over 16 million pounds of equipment to soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marine coalition forces on the ground, primarily in Afghanistan, although we do do some drops on occasion out into the hinterlands in Iraq. We anticipate in 2009 that we will at least surpass 16 million pounds and most probably be up between 20 (million) and 25 million pounds of air dropped equipment and supplies as the fight continues. And then air medical evacuation, of course, is a large portion of what we do to ensure either with rotary wing or light fixed wing that we're able to extract our wounded from forward operating locations, bring them to a theater level hospital in Afghanistan and then be able to transship them out to a regional hospital in Europe and then back to the states as required.

So those are the major mission sets. Of course, the push in our airmen as our total force increases, how do we size the airmen and the aircraft and the command and control to appropriately provide that synchronization and integration in the battle space and we are doing that as we speak in concert and consultation and in direct synchronization with our ground forces and the ground force commander.

With that being said, I'll open it up to your questions and look forward to talking to you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Let's turn it over to David. David, you're first.

Q Good evening, general, this is David Axe with WarIsBoring. How are you?

GEN. NORTH: I'm doing great. How are you, David?

Q Great. A recent ABC poll found that 44 percent of Afghans -- and I'm quoting here -- who experienced local bombing believe that attacks against coalition forces could be justified. So in light of that, how do you balance the need for close air support against the potentially damaging effect that errant bombing can have on Afghan support for coalition efforts?

GEN. NORTH: Right. Good question. Let me phrase it like this. This is the most precise combat operation the world has ever seen. The weapons that

are employed on demand are either in direct response to our coalition forces, Afghan security forces, U.S. or coalition forces that have been directly engaged by the enemy or they are dropped in direct response to intelligence where we have got absolutely positive indications in PID, what we call a positive ID of hostile forces.

And so we are -- when the errant weapon or errant individual falls into a weapons path and there is a claim of a non-combatant either injured or killed on the battle space, that we investigate each and every one of these. Clearly, the enemy forces and I believe you're all aware of this, they will shoot and hide and run into a village and continue to shoot and prosecute an attack against either Afghan security or coalition security forces and they will use non-combatants as human shields or they will hide among them and continue to fight. There is no such thing, you know, the purely innocent in our business as we do business in a combat zone and we need to be very careful that as we are, that we have absolutely positive identification of our hostile forces before we release a weapon -- to release every weapon with ground commanders' direction and intent, very often, personnel that are directly engaged with the enemy. We evaluate every release that is made we viewed. And again, if we find in error, either in execution or a probability where we believe that there may have been a non-combatant in the weapon zone that we investigate that and we're very upfront and honest on it.

Many, many times with our full motion video capability from our manned and unmanned aerial vehicles, we track the enemy for days or weeks to ensure that we have got positive ID, proper legal authorities, proper command authorities to ensure that we can release a weapon to get the desired effects from our ground commanders.

And so we take this very seriously. We continue to evaluate every opportunity for either new technology. Every one of our airplanes that we fly has got full motion video capability with a video downlink such that our JTACS in the field or in the tactical operations centers are seeing the exact view that our aviators are seeing overhead and is very, very precise in our business.

Q I'm sorry.

Can I clarify? You said -- did you say that there is no such thing as purely innocent in our business or there is such a thing as purely innocent in our business?

GEN. NORTH: Well, what I'm trying to say is that in our business, the non-combatants very often are drawn into a fight, an ongoing fight, by the enemy by the insurgent forces. And when our ground forces are on the ground, they will be told by local villagers that the Taliban or al Qaeda will come into their village, hide among them and start a ground fight with civilians, non-combatants in the middle of a fight with the intention of trying to draw that fight into an environment of which they can use it for an IO campaign.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, thank you. Thank you, David.

GEN. NORTH: Thanks, David.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, David. Let's go to Jim. Jim, you're next.

Q Good evening, General, Jim Dolbow with the Naval Institute blog.

GEN. NORTH: Hi, Jim. How are you?

Q Pretty good. Can you give us an update on the Air Force's soft power initiatives in Afghanistan?

GEN. NORTH: Well, what we try to do is, of course, take our capacity vehicle that generates what is required. And soft power could be delivering humanitarian supplies and equipment. We do that quite a bit. Throughout the winter when it's cold, we will deliver medical supplies, blankets, food, fuel as required into specific areas. Very often an indication of soft power is the proper effect required to cause the enemy, the insurgents, to separate from a fight. And so an example of soft power might be just the presence of an airplane, either fighter, bomber or unmanned aerial vehicle overhead because the insurgent forces know that with an airplane overhead that we have got incredible capability to persistently stare in as well and then to be able to bring force into provide presence overhead, our ground forces. And so very often just the mere presence of an airplane overhead is enough to scatter the enemy and cause them to disengage from friendly forces, and we believe as I know you all know that a proportional force and proportional use of force is very important in our business. If we can scatter the enemy and cause a firefight to dislodge merely by being overhead, then that's a win. And so that is one indication of soft power.

The other indication, of course, is the persistent presence overhead where we can isolate, track and then find, fix and finish or capture an enemy without having to have a kinetic event either on the ground or in the air.

So that, in sum, several different examples, if you will, soft power. I would call it appropriate power and appropriate use of combat assets and resources.

Q Thank you, General.

GEN. NORTH: You bet. Thank you, Jim.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go to Andrew. Andrew, you're next.

Q General, good morning, Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us, sir.

GEN. NORTH: Thanks, Andrew. How are you?

Q Good. Thanks. Sir, I want to go back to David's question about close air support, if you would. The Marine Corps for years has been running their own close air support system, which they've done very successfully. The Army has theirs, which is slightly different. But now in Afghanistan, you've got these mixed units of Army, Marines, National Guard, different coalition forces.

Is there going to be any sort of set -- would things be coordinated and synchronized? Are we going to continue to have everybody trying to do things their own way?

GEN. NORTH: Well, first of all, I wouldn't characterize it the way you just did. Everybody doing it their own way is not the way it works in warfare and we've been synchronized in both Iraq and Afghanistan collectively through --

units that tie into the theater controlled systems in our business and we do that through, you know, either ground radar sites or our airborne radar sites to enable us through the expeditionary air support operations groups, EASOGs and -- (inaudible) -- equivalence to be able to focus airplanes off of the air tasking order because everyone flies off the CFAC air tasking order. And we program and schedule that ATO, synchronized to the scheme and maneuver of the ground force and in Afghanistan that's the different regional commanders in their major operational domain for each day. And so we are apportioning and allocating the appropriate amount of overhead error, both ISR, armed overwatch, the appropriate amount of tankers, air drop, et cetera, to make sure that we are meeting the desired scheme of maneuver. And that air flow meets what we call -- (inaudible) -- attack request such that we can deliver through the various platforms what the ground commander needs.

When it comes time for a (CASS ?) response to what we call a TIC or Troops In Contact, this means that our forces on the ground have impending knowledge or they are actually engaged in a fight or are getting ready to be engaged in a fight. And so we will then put, normally, ideally, a fighter or a bomber -- (background noise) -- because it's a coordinated event, both in air to ground. And if there is an event where someone is attacked, we will put the closest asset available, manned or unmanned overhead to get eyes on target and then meet the requirements of the ground commander who normally has a JTAC, joint terminal attack controller tied to the organization and then is able to provide the response that the ground commander needs.

It's very synchronized and it is working very well; in fact, we normally work through what we call EASOCS, air support op squadrons. Just two days ago, we have aligned our ASOCS under a current top level organization called an EASOG, or air support operations group, to provide the next higher level of synchronization as we provide or start to work up with the increase of ground forces.

I'm very pleased with the coalition integration. I'm very pleased with our Marine integration into the ATO and as well -- you know, as I said, the coalition forces apply on the ATO. It is a ballet in action every day and on our combined air op center floor where we execute the daily ATO, air tasking order and follow that, things such as weather, emerging requirements enable us to reflow the scheme of maneuver on a daily basis, in fact, on average, when we publish the air tasking order because of those things that happen every day in the battle space, we actually re-roll somewhere between 30 (percent) and 50 percent of the daily flow to meet the emerging needs, whether it's because of weather, aircraft maintenance or emerging requirements by either intelligence or ground commanders' intent to move aircraft throughout the area of operation and Afghanistan is about the size of Texas, so there's a lot of space for maneuvering everyday.

Q Okay. Thanks very much.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go to Noah, Noah, you're next.

Q Hi, general, it's Noah Shackman with Wired. Thanks for taking the time to do this.

I've got two questions for you, the first is, between President Bush's recent announcements and President Obama's recent announcements, we're now going to see 21,000 additional ground troops in Afghanistan. Do you anticipate a

similar increase in air power? Or might there be a decrease because there's now more troops on the ground to cover the country?

GEN. NORTH: Well, first of all, the troop increase, this military personnel increase and so you'll see -- we will see an increase of our airmen in proportion based on the requirements that the increase in ground forces bring in. I have already moved in several extra C-130s to provide the inter-theater lift to move those personnel on the battlefield. We've moved in several helicopters for our combat CSAR and medical evacuation. And I am planning -- based on an ongoing analysis, I'm prepared to bring in additional fighters if the analysis of the effort -- ways that we will need to have more forces overhead.

My goal is to meet the requirements and, of course, the way you can do that and this is the beauty of our asymmetric ability to fight is with our tanker force, you can take two ships or fighters or a bomber, the B-1, and keep them overhead for extended vulnerability periods, vul periods is what we call it, and so you're capitalizing on that effect of a tanker overhead to be able to produce that armed overwatch for an extended period of time.

So we will see an increase of airmen. There is, obviously, construction going on in Afghanistan to meet the bed down of the ground forces and as well to be able to have expeditionary airfields and facilities for airmen to operate from throughout Afghanistan to be able to maximize our capability for our ground forces.

Certainly, the numbers will be much smaller -- you know, I'm looking at probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,000 to 1,500 airmen to be able to come in and do that type of integrated support to meet the requirements, both in airlift, air drop, of course, air medical evacuation. The air refueling in ISR comes from off axis if you will outside of Afghanistan from bases in the CENTCOM AOR throughout the Middle East. And so we're able to provide that type of overhead support from outside of Afghanistan.

Q Great. Thanks for that. And my next question is, several administration officials have now been referring to Afghanistan and Pakistan as one theater. So what do you expect as Afghanistan and Pakistan get treated as one theater, how do you expect the CAOC role to expand to cover Pakistan?

GEN. NORTH: Well, right now, I do not anticipate any change that the CFAC role is or the role of the Combined Air Operation Center. While the strategy of how we deal between, you know, the border area, our aircraft are falling within Afghanistan and we meet mission requirements from either com U.S. forces Afghanistan or com ISAF within the borderlines of Afghanistan because that's where our ground forces are.

Q But --

LT. CRAGG: Noah, I'm going to go to Greg and stay on the line, Greg, and then C.J. next. So Greg, please.

Q Hey, general, it's Greg Grant from military.com.

GEN. NORTH: How are you?

Q Good. Thank you. As you well know, the terrain in Afghanistan means that helicopters are really the only way to get anywhere with any degree

of speed and there's troops on the ground that have constantly complained about a shortage of helicopters. As the air component commander, I'm curious to hear about what your opinion is on what you'd like to see as far as rotary wing assets in theater? I know there's a combat aviation brigade going in. Will that satisfy the need? Also, as far as close air support, would you rather see rotary wing gunships providing that close air support? Or do you prefer fixed wing? And also the medical evacuation -- there's talk that it still takes two hours, up to two hours to get troops from contact -- or wounded troops back to a hospital versus the one hour -- the golden hour in Iraq. And what can you do to speed that up?

GEN. NORTH: Vis-a-vis helicopters, you know, we collectively from COM US for -- COMISAF, look at the requirements and we go in RFF -- requirements for capability, I believe, what we've got is right for requirements. As you know from the air component perspective, what I provide is the CSAR helicopters and so that's the contribution that I provide, of course, most of the rotary wing is either U.S. Army or other nations' armies and they're flying below the coordination level.

So I'll defer that question to the ARCENT commander or to the commander of USFORA (ph). I believe what is programmed in will be sufficient for the forces on the ground.

In regards to the mix of CAS airplanes, you know, it takes all kinds to be able to maneuver in the business and the capabilities of fixed wing fighter and attack, the F-15Es, A-10s, F-16s, Harriers, the B-1 is a fabulous CAS platform, as well as attack helicopters. They all complement each other and so the weapons, air weapons teams in the integration where the helicopter rotor wing works very closely with the ground scheme of maneuver closer board, that provides the close in umbrella and immediate response umbrella when it is there and available and of course with fixed wing overhead, you can arrange the battle space, again, Afghanistan is pretty good, so we can cover a lot of space with our fixed wing fighters and bombers.

The terrain is, as you say, it is very unforgiving and very complicated for movement; not a lot of roads. Rotor wing is not the only way to move folks. There are lots of very small dirt strips at high altitude where C-130s and other light aircraft move people around quite a bit. Our C-17s go into some fairly tight places as well and these are the advantages of these tactical airlift platforms have.

In regards to the air medical evacuation, we are posturing our helicopters and our ground alert fixed wing to be able to meet and achieve that stabilization period that's done on the battle space by incredibly professional and competent medical technicians in the battle space, and of course, all the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines out there get quite extensive combat skills training. And so the positioning of the helicopters, I would say that your two hour number is high and that we have worked with U.S. forces Afghanistan -- comfortable with the response times that we are meeting collectively across the battle space.

If we can get as you say and the golden hour is very important, you know, the success rate of survivability is incredible in the 97 (percent) to 98 percent rate once we get someone to a theater level hospital and so our goal with rotor to a field hospital or movement with fixed wing quickly to a theater level is utmost on all of our minds. And, you know, one of the biggest -- (audio break) -- throughout the ages is how did our medical communities take

care of our wounded personnel. It's absolutely amazing when you see them at work -- and humbling.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And we only have time for one other question. And C.J. came on late. C.J., your question, please.

Q Yes. Thank you, sir, for taking our calls. C.J. Grisham from A Soldier's Perspective. You know we've been in Afghanistan, sir, for a couple of years now and with this influx of personnel, we've got an influx of air power as well that will also create a greater threat for catastrophic events.

Knowing the fact of the Taliban and by extension, al Qaeda still have access to some of our Stinger air missiles and things like that, can you speak on the threats to our air power and kind of what's being done to protect our pilots in the region and their cargo?

GEN. NORTH: Sure. Well, as you know, C.J., from having been here, the major threat that we face in both Iraq and Afghanistan is small arms and light Triple A. We do see, particularly in our rotor force, RPG-7s fired, of course, unguided. We see occasionally the SA-7 type handheld IRSAM. Every aircraft in our tactical lift and our rotor type helicopters have got defensive measures capability and our intelligence is very good and so our aviators going out are armed with the latest intelligence and the best in technology for IR missile defeat and so we're very comfortable with the technology, the capabilities, and as you know, aviators, both rotor and fixed, have to keep their head on a swivel because it is dangerous out there on occasion.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, sir, I know we're cutting close to the end of the Roundtable. I want to turn it over to you if you'd like to end with a closing thought?

GEN. NORTH: Okay. Well, first of all, I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you all. It is an involving domain as C.J. said. We've been at this in both Iraq and Afghanistan for a while and so the ongoing dialogue is very important.

I would offer from an airman's perspective that hearing from an airman how we're doing business is important, but hearing from the soldiers and the sailors, the airmen and the Marines that are on the ground of what the air components are doing to synchronize, integrate and support their air efforts on the war is most important because we would not be overhead if we did not have great Americans and great members from all the coalitions that are in this fight on the ground and from every airman involved, from me as a senior airman down to our youngest airman, either in the sky or on the ground working the effort and it could be from in Afghanistan or it could be as far away as Creech Air Force Base because they're flying a Predator or the Reaper, our number one mission every day is to support the fight on the ground and we're real proud of how we do that, most importantly, we're proud of all the folks that are fighting the fight in the collective domain and I look forward to the opportunity to talk to you all again in the future. I hope this was useful for you as it was for me.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

GEN. NORTH: Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And with that just a note to everyone, today's program will be available on defense link on the bloggers' link, as well as an audio file, transcript and a story.

Thank you, sir, and thank you, gentlemen, for attending today.

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