

One of the greatest challenges of my life was my last deployment to Kandahar AF, Afghanistan, in 2011 with the 74th Fighter Squadron Flying Tigers, assigned to the 23rd Fighter Group out of Moody AFB, Georgia. Our commanders would tell all of us that we were continuing the legacy of the world famous Flying Tigers by acting as the tip of the spear against enemy forces. As an Air Force Staff Sergeant and the ranking deployed member of Weapons Standardization, my assignment for seven months would put me directly responsible for ensuring the safety and accuracy of all munitions loading occurring on the eighteen A-10 jets the 74th Fighter Squadron brought. During that time period I would report directly to the Chief Master Sergeant at Kandahar who oversaw everything dealing with aircraft munitions on the entire base. I was rarely liked by everyone I worked with since it was my job to enforce standards and safety rules for everyone, but it was my responsibility to do so and I had to make sure I did what was expected of me. I was held to a higher standard since I was considered the example all the other crews were to follow. I had to make sure my crew and I followed exact procedure in everything we did and make sure no mistakes were made.

Six days a week for twelve hour shifts, my days were spent loading munitions and launching aircraft myself with my crew consisting of the two individuals I directly supervised. Along with working on the jets, I was also responsible for inspecting and evaluating the other crews while they performed their duties, inspecting the aircraft to ensure they were mission ready, and making sure that the munitions were all loaded correctly to guarantee functionality. Munitions loaded on a regular basis for the A-10s would consist of 500-lb. MK-82 “dummy” bombs, GBU-38 GPS guided bombs, white phosphorous rockets, and of course 1150 rounds of 30-MM tank-buster ammunition. Loaded with these munitions our jets would provide constant close air support to the US ground troops around Afghanistan, whether in the forests, mountains, or deserts. Many times the jets came back with bombs, rockets, and ammunition expended. We knew that the pilot just helped out some soldier out there and now it was our responsibility to get that jet ready for yet another mission to help more troops.

During the deployment, we were lucky enough to have one day a week off in order to rest up. The only problem was that there really wasn't much to do on the base, so usually I would sleep in and then maybe watch some movies. I did make a habit of getting a cup of coffee and a donut from the Canadian coffee shop on base, Tim Horton's, which was quite delicious. Much time was also devoted to going to the gym, which I made a point of going at least three times a

week, including my day off. Time could also be spent wondering through the BX to see if any new items came in, or check out the market area which consisted of a handful of local shops selling various souvenirs and other items. There were also some food joints there for when you tired of the dining facilities' food and wanted something with more flavor. I'd usually wonder through there on my days off just to see what's available and going on, except when the intense summer heat began to hit.

August was of course the hottest month, but it also coincided with Ramadan, so the terrorists did not attack us at that time and mostly stayed hidden. However, the day after Ramadan ended, the base would face an attack consisting of about sixteen rocket attacks in one day. It would start late in the night going into the early morning, when I was smoking a cigarette with one of the other guys before a couple more jets would take off. Three explosions were heard around us within a few seconds and in close proximity. After dropping to the ground as we were trained, we then sprinted over to the nearest concrete bunker to wait out the attack. Even with these difficulties, once the all clear sirens sounded, it was back to work and I had to make sure we were mission ready. The soldiers out in the desert and mountain ranges depended on our jets providing them air cover once they were in a hot spot. Luckily none of us were harmed by the rocket attacks and none of the jets were damaged as well. The closest they got was one rocket got lodged into one of the barrier walls in between two of our A-10s one morning when it fell, but did not explode to cause any real damage.

When loading live munitions, there are many safety precautions the team leader must be aware of and follow to maintain the safety of his team and those around. Being the top ranked Weapons Standardization member present at the base with the exception of the Chief I reported to, I had that much more responsibility to maintain compliance and safety practices. The biggest problem I faced involved the loading of white phosphorus rockets, which are extremely hazardous and required a safety kit with a large container of water present. Many of the crews did not want to take the time to check out the safety items prior to loading the rockets, so I would have to continuously fail and retrain the teams to ensure compliance. Needless to say none of the members involved would be happy, but this was necessary due to maintaining the most safety during such a potentially hazardous operation. Proper training and compliance with the procedures would not only prevent any injuries or deaths during the loading operations, but were also essential to make sure all weapons were ready for use and that not one jet would miss its

mission to help the ground troops when they needed it. Just as the Flying Tigers dealt devastating blows to Japanese forces in World War II, we made sure our jets were able to take out the enemies wherever and whenever they could.

It was a tough several months, but we were all proud of what we were able to accomplish and knew this mission would be remembered as the continuing legacy of the Flying Tigers. Our mission in the end was successful and many ground troops were happy to have our jets flying overhead, scaring the enemy with that intimidating smile. During the 7 months at Kandahar, our jets would drop over 200 bombs and fire over 70,000 rounds of ammunition, delivering a devastating blow to the enemy forces in that area and saving the lives of many of our ground forces combating the Taliban throughout the country. After a job well-done, everyone was ready to get back home to their friends, family, and all the familiarities we all missed. I myself always appreciated seeing all the green again outside of the window as our plane would slowly descend for a landing. The next things would be getting back to my car and taking it for a drive around, enjoying the freedom of going where I want.