

Unique Airmen help connect 'two worlds'

By Staff Sgt. Carlos Diaz
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SATHER AIR BASE, Iraq — A joint terminal attack controller is completely immersed downrange in the battlefield. His heart is pounding and his forehead drips with sweat as he directs the action of combat aircraft to provide close-air support for U.S. ground forces in Iraq.

The JTAC's eyes light up as he sees the aircraft deliver a precise, deadly aerial attack on an unsuspecting, hostile target. From forward positions, JTACs employ highly detailed communication channels and a well-coordinated process to execute the CAS mission.

These unique Airmen are aligned with their Army brethren and serve with the 5th Air Support Operations Squadron.

"Our job is to communicate with the aircraft and ground forces," said Staff Sgt. Justin Pilant, a two-year Air Force JTAC, deployed from Fort Lewis. "We connect the two worlds."

Pilant said with careful communication, they're able to provide superior firepower to eliminate various enemy targets.

"We conduct targeted raids, general area clearance and search for weapons caches," said Pilant, the veteran of three deployments and several combat operations.

Airman 1st Class Josh Scott is the youngest tactical air control party specialist in the team. But what he lacks in experience, he more than makes up for with his assertive attitude and moxie.

"He's my right-hand man," Pilant said. "We're a team, and we work very well together. During missions, he's so important to me because he can pass information and relay messages."

"We bring a lot to the fight, and I'm glad we can provide that type of support to our Army comrades," Scott said. "They trust us to do our jobs, and that's



Staff Sgt. Christopher Frobuccino works with his infantry counterparts in the back of a Stryker to plan air support for their movement along a route in Baghdad. Frobuccino is a Joint Terminal Attack Controller in-charge of communicating coordinates for close air support during fire fights with enemy ground forces.

a great feeling."

During missions, Scott has plenty on his mind.

"I'm constantly thinking," he said. "I have to know exactly where our friendly forces are; I'm always looking out for my JTAC and making sure our communication capabilities are in sync."

"I have to be prepared for anything," Pilant said of his mindset. "I need to be sure I have everything I need to sup-

port the brigade commander."

Being prepared and ready for anything means the training JTACs receive is invaluable.

"We train hard so we feel that same feeling in the battlefield," said Staff Sgt. Chris Frobuccino, a JTAC on his second deployment to Iraq.

"When I'm out there," he said, "the element of time is the same and the urgency is just as great."

The JTAC's field opportunities enhance their abilities.

One pair of JTACs put their training to good use in late January. Senior Airmen Dan Strom and Josh Woeckener eliminated approximately 300 enemy forces. The young Airmen battle tracked and controlled for more than 24 hours.

"I had a numb feeling," Strom said about his first combat drop. "It

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was weird hearing the whizzing sound of bombs hitting our desired targets."

"The enemy was well-armed," Woeckener said, "and they put up a good fight. If we hadn't taken them out, it could've gotten bad."

Spc. Jason Zwettler and Spc. Andres Solis, both members of the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division appreciate the Airmen's efforts.

"They provide our overwatch," the Zwettler said. "If the situation calls for it, they can drop those bombs and eliminate the enemy with amazing quickness."

"Our missions would be a lot more nail biting if it weren't for them," Solis said. "They're very proficient at what they do, and they do it so well."

Controlling the skies and directing the action of offensive operations is a job that allows JTACs to join a special fraternity.

"Working alongside the Army is like a brotherhood," Scott said. "Everyone helps each other out and we've made great, long-lasting friendships."

"I think this is a great job, because a CAS mission could mean life or death for an infantry unit," he said. "I'm glad I have a small part in helping to save lives."