

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL WALTER GIVHAN,
COMMANDING GENERAL, COMBINED AIR POWER TRANSITION FORCE & 438TH AIR
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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's
Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, May 26, 2009. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer
Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll
be moderating today's call.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please clearly state your name and
organization you're with prior to submitting your question, or asking your
question.

Today our guest is Brigadier General Walter Givhan. He is the
commander, 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, and commanding general, Combined Air
Power Transition Force, Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan, in
Kabul, Afghanistan. He leads a joint organization to develop, train and mentor
the Afghan National Army Air Corps. The Afghan National Army provides trained
and ready airmen and aircraft to support the government of Afghanistan. I know
the general has more to add to that, so what I'm going to do is I'm going to
turn the floor over to you, sir, if you'd like to start with an opening
statement.

GEN. GIVHAN: Well, hi. Well, good morning to you all from
Afghanistan. As Jennifer said, I'm Brigadier General Walter Givhan, and I'm the
commander of the Combined Air Power Transition Force and the 438th Air
Expeditionary Wing, the two hats I wear.

I'd like to just make a few opening comments. First of all, you
should understand that, as -- and when I refer to CAPTF, if you hear me refer to
CAPTF, that's the acronym for the Combined Air Power Transition Force. The
CAPTF is part of the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan. And so
this is the larger command, whose mission is to plan, program and implement the
generation and development of the Afghan National Security Forces.

Now, that -- to simplify that a little bit, what we're doing is helping
the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan build up both the Afghan
National Army and the Afghan National Police. And in the Afghan construct, the
Air Corps is part of the army and a key part overall of the Afghan national
security forces, because we actually support, by air, both the Afghan National

Army and, as well, the Afghan National Police and any other element of the Afghan government that requires our help.

Now, particularly, we are responsible for the Air Corps. Now -- and this has really been an incredible thing, because it's sort of like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the Air Corps is. It -- they have a long history that goes back to the '20s, but they were most recently -- the war that has gone on for -- over the last 30 years, even with the Soviets having built them up before, they really were down to nothing by 2001 after -- the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom. Now it's one of the most important and fastest-growing components of the Afghan national security forces, and we're very -- (coughs) -- excuse me -- we're very proud of what we've been able to achieve.

A lot of people ask, well, why air power? You know, Afghanistan -- you know, seems like that may be a little bit too much. Well, it's absolutely essential. This country, Afghanistan, begs for air power. You've got vast distances: a country the size of Texas. You've got forbidding terrain, with the Hindu Kush mountains right in the middle of the country. You've got a road system that is still immature and also has an IED threat. And you've got almost no rail.

So -- and then, with -- we'll get into the numbers, but then you've got an army and a security -- and the police, 87,000 in the Army, about 82,000 in the police right now. And all of that begging for airmen. So air power is absolutely essential.

It's also an asymmetric capability that we have and the enemy does not, and it's a great advantage in that regard, both from a mobility and a firepower perspective.

We have really taken an aggressive approach in the last two years to getting the air corps in the air and into this fight, and they are in the air and in this fight right now, making a contribution.

And we did that by two ways. One, we took pilots, the older pilots, average age about 45. And we got them back up flying the aircraft they knew, which were primarily Russian-type aircraft, the workhorses being the An-32 fixed-wing transport and the Mi-17 helicopter, familiar platforms. And we're able, with our mentors and by providing equipment and actually acquiring more of those actual platforms for them, get them up into the air and getting them into this fight.

At the same time, we're building towards the long term, and as I often say, building an air force in the middle of a war is sort of like building an airplane in the middle of a flight. But we got to do it. And so we've got long-term acquisition plans for -- and we'll see the first modern -- more modern airlifters, in forms of C-27, arriving here this fall. We'll also be looking at acquiring a combination of fixed-winged trainers and light attack aircraft in the near future, but also doing all of those things that are required to really build an air corps in total.

Which -- this means we're building facilities, bases all over the country. We're building a logistic system to support and sustain those aircraft, because remember, as is the case in all of CSTC-A, this is about building sustainable capability and capacity for the Afghan national security forces -- that approach is the same, no matter whether you're talking about the police, the army or the air corps -- also command and control mechanisms, to be

able to actually employ this airpower effectively. And then the things that you normally think about with an air corps is acquiring aircraft and training the pilots and -- to fly them and the maintainers to maintain them.

So all of that is going on, because, to get back to the CSTC-A (mission ?), we really believe that the most effective way to fight this insurgency is to enable the Afghans to fight it themselves.

And that's what this is all about, is creating Afghan capacity and capability to do that.

And we're already seeing the Air Corps and the Afghan air power that they're generating really deliver us some benefits. And let me just give you a couple of quick ones, and then I'll end my comments and turn it over to you for questions.

But just last week, the Air Corps, even with some weather, flew over 105 missions. They transported almost 2,000 troops around the country. They did six medical evacuations of patients. And also something that's very important in this country, in this culture and religion, is the quick transport of human remains from the battlefield: six human remains transmitted -- or transported; and almost 4,000 kilograms of cargo.

I'll also mention that with -- just in the last month, air power really delivered a humanitarian benefit here by doing flood relief in the north, and -- we had flooding in the north. And in the course of about 10 days, the Air Corps, with -- primarily with Mi-17 helicopters, rescued over 1,200 people. And I got to tell you, the numbers in there probably include a few goats and cows that got pushed on those helicopters. Some interesting photos from all of that.

But, you know, this is showing the beneficent face of air power and really, from every perspective, giving the Afghan people a chance to be proud of their own air power, rescuing their own citizens and helping them out there.

We're also, lastly, planning for the future. And to that end, I talked about the older pilots. We just sent, in the past two weeks, 24 young Afghan officers off to the United States. They've already had some English-language training; they're going to get a little bit more to get them ready. And then they're going to go to pilot training in the United States. And that's just about half. We'll send about 25 more to follow them in the coming week, to build that next generation of Afghan pilots. And they'll be coming back and flying some of these newer aircraft that we're about to get them.

So a lot of exciting things going on with the Air Corps. And with that, let me conclude my opening comments and turn it over to you for questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Let's go ahead and go with Jeff. Jeff, you're first. Q General, thanks for joining us this morning. My name's Jeff Dressler. I'm from the Institute for the Study of War. Just have a quick question for you.

GEN. GIVHAN: Morning.

Q Listening to everything you say, I've been reading some of the air power summaries over the past couple months, and I haven't seen a whole lot in there about, you know, autonomous Afghan Air Corps operations.

How -- what's their capability in terms of operating autonomously? How much do they do that, versus partnering with coalition forces?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, good question. I don't think you will find them listed in the air power summaries. I'll have to look. I don't know that for sure, but I have a feeling they're probably not being captured in all of that. Let me -- but it's a good question, and let me answer it in terms of capability.

The basic capability that we are focused on right now is mobility, and that's both fixed wing and rotary wing. So fixed wing obviously, air field to air field; so Kabul to Kandahar, Kabul to Herat, and various airfields around the country. And then, a lot of battlefield mobility generated by the Mi-17s going out to the various forward operating bases, as well as we have some based down in Kandahar to do there.

So, now, what -- they have PKM 7.62 machine guns, that's basically for self-defense. Now, one of the exciting things that we're doing right now -- and in fact, I'm going to fly tomorrow as part of this mission -- is we're taking Mi-35s, these are attack helicopters, Hinds, and we are -- we have Czech instructor pilots that are part of our team and working with us, and we'll actually be going out to the range with the Afghans.

We just got these refurbished Hinds in. They were donated by the Czech Republic. We have nine of them now, total; and six donated by the Czech Republic, three were already here. And we refurbished the helicopters. And we're doing a very deliberate approach to getting them into battle now, with doing basic range work. But by the summer, you will see them actually employing in an escort and overwatch role, but with an attack capability that they haven't had.

The last thing I would add is one of the things we're very proud of is presidential airlift. We have three Mi-17s that are dedicated to the presidential airlift mission. They achieved initial operational capability in October of 2008 -- so not even a year ago -- and they've already flown the president nine different times to various things. You've got complete confidence in them. And we're very proud of that effort, as well.

So those are the basic -- we're also doing the medical evacuation mission, as you heard, humanitarian relief mission. But we haven't gotten into the attack close air support mission yet. LT. CRAGG: Okay. Thanks, Jeff.

Let's go to Chuck.

Q Good evening, sir. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal; wanted to talk numbers.

What's the current number of members of the Iraqi -- Afghan air corps? Can you tell me, how many are pilots? And can you talk about their organization? Are they squadrons? Are they regiments? How are they organized? And are they -- do the various army corps have their own aircraft? Or is it a national setup?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, great questions. Let me try to take that a little bit at a time.

First of all, let's talk overall numbers of the air corps. Right now the air corps is a little over 2,500 personnel total. Now, of those personnel -

- by the way, growing -- right now the target is 7,250 by 2016. But we may get there a little sooner. We'll see.

It's a -- of the pilots, we're talking about 187 pilots right now, about 62 on the fixed-wing side, 125 on the rotary-wing side. Like I said, these are very experienced pilots. That's the good news. They've got a lot of time and seen a lot of combat.

But the -- you know, as you can imagine, a war that's been -- I mean, a nation that's been wracked by 30 years of war, they haven't had a lot of time to do training in recent years.

So that's one of the big emphasis items that we have, is really working on that training. And to that end, we augment them with our own instructor pilots.

So we have, for example, eight American mentor instructor pilots, Air Force, checked out, in Mi-17, to fly with the Afghans. We also have mentors flying with them on the fixed-wing side, as well, on the An-32.

To the point of how they're organized, it's organized more like an Air Force with wings and squadrons. So right now you have one wing, which is the Kabul air wing. You have a rotary-wing squadron. You have a fixed-wing squadron. And then you have a presidential airlift squadron.

Now, we're going to be -- we've already moved out helicopters -- because of the operational demand -- to Kandahar, Herat and Mazari Sharif in the north. And they actually operate out of there in detachments. We have personnel with them too.

And basically what they're doing is, they're supporting the different corps sectors. So, for example, 209th Corps in the north at Mazar-e Sharif; 207th Corps in the west at Herat; 205th Corps in -- at Kandahar in the south; and then what we can do is, Kabul is close enough to 201st and 203rd Corps here in the east that we can support most of that out of Kabul.

So again, centralized control, decentralized execution. With the limited number of assets that we have right now, that's really important for us to get the maximum out of the aircraft.

And I'm sorry, I'm -- did I answer all of the questions? I'm not sure.

Q The -- yes -- yeah, you got them all. Thank you.

GEN. GIVHAN: You're welcome.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. We're going to be going back and forth between Jeff and Chuck. Jeff, go ahead, please.

Q You know what? I'm actually all set. I was just going to listen in, if that's okay.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Chuck, do you have any follow-on questions?

Q Oh, I got a bunch.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Chuck.

Q Okay. The detachments that are assigned to the -- to support the various corps, how far up the Air Corps chain of command does a -- does the corps have -- the army corps have to go to get that support? How integrated are they with being able to request a supply drop or something like that?

GEN. GIVHAN: Oh, no. It's very integrated. In fact, for the helicopters that are actually located out there, the detachment, if there are no intervening national priorities, the priority will go to the corps commander to -- for his purposes.

So without getting into -- there are various levels, but to make it simple, sort of national priority -- and an example might be the flood, for example. If they -- you know -- you know, to mass assets, to try to provide relief as much as possible, that becomes the national priority -- push the helicopters out to the north. But as to the national priority or tasking, then the corps commander can use the helicopters to support his own operation. And then if the corps commander doesn't have anything going that day, then the -- it's left to the detachment commander to accomplish whatever training he might have.

Q Okay. And logistics-wise, are the -- especially the detachments, but overall the Air Corps -- is it well supplied for training with regard to things like POL and -- like that?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah. You know, I tell you, logistics is one of the big-emphasis items that we and all of the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan are truly focused on. And, you know, when you get to the graduate level of doing these things, you know that the logistics determines the limits of strategy and your actions.

So we've put that first, and there's a massive effort to build a logistical system. And we've been very fortunate with -- right now, with the basing, it's been concentrated, and we've made sure that we've built up the logistical base wherever we put the aircraft, so that we can support those aircraft -- and with again, Kabul, for right now, being both the headquarters of the air corps and the headquarters of the Kabul Air Wing, being a centralized point for the aviation support depot that we just stood up.

But we have not had substantial problems, but that's really because of the hard work of everybody involved, Afghan and U.S., in doing a lot of planning and getting those logistical requirements met up front.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And Chuck, I just -- I didn't mean to interrupt you. I apologize. Someone chimed in --

Q Yeah, I was going to --

LT. CRAGG: Who's joining us?

Q Hi. It's Bob Michael.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Bob, I'm going to let Chuck ask his next question. I'm going to turn it over to you if you have any follow-on questions.

Chuck, go ahead.

Q I wanted to ask about -- we read about these combined operations where U.S. and Afghan national security forces are airlifted into a situation. How much of that is done using Afghan Air Corps assets, and how much of it is American or NATO assets?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, I can't give you, you know, a real percentage divide, but the Afghans are very keen, because they're very proud of what they've achieved, in terms of the buildup of their own forces. And they're very keen to be able to support themselves. So in every case that we can, you know, it'll be a maximum support by Afghan means. Interestingly enough -- let me give you an example. I attend a weekly meeting of integration between ISAF air and the representative for the Afghan air -- and we've got a great system that works out when the Afghans don't have enough capacity, that ISAF can pick up some of that need. Well, and usually that's more in the fixed-wing, I'll have to say. Well, last week was a week in which not only did the Afghans not require any ISAF support at all on the aviation side, they actually carried NATO cargo and weapons for ISAF.

So the Afghans had enough extra capacity to actually do some things for the ISAF last week. But they really prefer to be able to support themselves whenever possible. So usually, these operations -- and I'll give you an example. You remember the prison break around Kandahar last year?

Q Yeah. Right.

GEN. GIVHAN: Last summer. The Afghans deployed basically by fixed wing and then by rotary a whole battalion -- what they call a kandak -- down to that -- Kandahar, in that area, and then used the rotary wing to put the troops into position, the Afghan troops into position, to conduct the operation. It was a -- it was a huge success.

So they're keen on that. And that's one of the reasons they're really excited about getting their Mi-35s up in the air, so that they also have that attack capability to support their forces as well.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thanks, Chuck.

Okay, let's go to Bob. Bob, please go ahead.

Q Hey, sir. Bob Michael, with the Mudville Gazette. And apologies for joining late, and I may be asking for repeated information.

GEN. GIVHAN: Oh, that's quite all right.

Q (Chuckles) -- yes, sir. The -- one, thanks for your service, especially on the day after Memorial Day. And two, the Afghan Air Force, is that a separate component? How's the structure over there? From the army, or is it all incorporated into one organization more so than in the United States?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah. Right now, it's the Afghan National Army Air Corps, and it is, if you will, the sixth corps of the Army, the Afghan National Army. So you have five land corps, and then you have one air corps. The air corps is the only corps, though, with a national responsibility. So it still

functions very much in an air force role, with complete responsibilities to national command authorities, to include, as I mentioned when I opened my comments, with supporting not just the movement of troops and supporting them, but also the movement of the Afghan National Police as well, and really anything that the government requires them to do. As I mentioned to these others about, they just finished conducting humanitarian relief missions in the north because of flooding, and airlifting civilians out, and so supporting those operations as well.

Yeah, I'll skip to the, probably, next logical question you might have. You know, is it -- will it become an air force? You know, really too early to tell. I mean, we're starting at a stage now where the important thing is getting the capability going and the integration with both the army and the police. And we'll take it from there.

Q Got it.

LT. CRAGG: Now, I know, Jeff, you said, you're just continuing to listen.

Now, Chuck, do you have any follow-on questions, before I let Bob ask one more, before we close for today?

Q I wanted to ask about the police and the air corps.

Certainly the Afghan police right now are not engaged in traditional policing. But are they getting any sort of aerial observation from the air corps or any kind of, I guess, overwatch or intel?

GEN. GIVHAN: Not so much.

The primary way in which we have supported the Afghan national police, one, is by movement of fixed-wing air, being able to move them from one district to another or one province to another, as part of our focused district development program, which involves having to move large numbers, to pull them out for training and then put other ones in to take their place.

Also for medical evacuation, we've done some of those cases. As you know just from reading, the Afghan national police have taken, you know, the brunt of the casualties lately. And so that's been important, to try to help them out on that.

We just right now do not have the numbers to do all of the things that we would welcome doing, if we did. We're building those. Like I said, right now we're about 35 aircraft total, building to a force of 128, both fixed-wing and rotary. And I could see it actually going beyond that, given that we may be expanding the army and the police beyond their present goals of 134,000 and the 82,000, with 4,800 added for Kabul that I think have been added to police lately.

So naturally one can look out and see, well, you know, border patrol would love to have a capability; which is part of the ministry of interior police too, the Afghan border police, you know, would love to be able to look along the border. Things like that are all capabilities that are nice to have but we haven't been able to fulfill yet, just because we don't have the numbers yet. Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Bob, did you have a follow-on question?

Q Sure. Without getting into specific numbers, sir, how about on the attack side? Are there any existing or plans for attack aircraft, rotary-or-fixed-wing? And I guess along the same lines, ISR capability, is there existing or planned ISR capability?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, let me -- that's good. I talked just a little bit earlier about the rotary-wing side. But your question is a good one to allow me to talk about both rotary-and-fixed-wing and what we envision.

First of all, rotary-wing. Right now we have nine Mi-35 attack helicopters. Three of those they already had, and then six more were donated by the Czech Republic. And then we paid to refurbish those.

So right now we just finished getting the full complement. And we've only begun now to take them out to the ranges and start checking the Afghans out with the weapons; first time they fired them in eight years, for some of these Mi-35 pilots.

We have Czech -- a team of Czech instructor pilots and maintenance personnel that are assisting us as part of my team with the Mi-35s. In fact, I'll be flying an Mi-35 mission tomorrow with them out to the range to observe.

So on the rotary-wing side, you'll have the Mi-35 attack helicopters that we think will be in the fight by later this summer. We envision a fixed-wing light attack and attack capability in the future. We're in the final stages of doing some acquisition decisions on that.

So we haven't -- we -- I -- you know, I can't tell you we're -- the specific aircraft that we're going to buy yet, because that decision hasn't been made. But, you know, you can imagine something like a combination of, you know, the -- a turboprop-type aircraft with a longer-order capability and ability to -- to employ in a close air-support role in a counterinsurgency environment; or a light jet, similarly, as a complement, maybe, to that, with also maybe some radar capability; and then either of those possibly outfitted with an ISR suite as well, of some sort, for observation.

So the short answer to your question is, we do have an attack capability, and we are going to buy more of it. Got it already on the rotary-wing side; we're going to buy more of it on the fixed-wing side.

Q So no -- any kind of time frame for when there may be self-sufficiency on the attack and ISR aspects?

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, you know, it's going to take a while.

The -- first of all, they're very excited about the Mi-35s, because, you know, just talking to them, they really want this fully autonomous Afghan operation with, you know, their own -- well, they've already got their own lift assets, but to have their own attack assets as well, they want that. And we want to give it to them.

So again, by this summer on the rotary-wing side. It'll be a couple more years before we get the first fixed-wing assets in, at a minimum. And

it'll take us a while to get the training done on that side. So, you know, three years down the road before we're really getting in it heavily on the fixed-wing side. We can always see that accelerated, possibly, but that -- you know, these things just -- they take a little while to stand up. So our plan, though, all along, has been by 2016 to have an Afghan National Army Air Corps that is sustainable and capable of independent operations to meet the security requirement for this country.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. With that, we've ended the time for today's roundtable, and I wanted to turn the floor back over to you, sir, if you'd like to end with a closing statement.

GEN. GIVHAN: Yeah, I would, thank you.

First of all, I want to thank all of you for your interest in this. This is sometimes a story that doesn't get told; that, you know -- and it's rewarding mission that we're doing here. I think you can tell I'm a little excited about it. I've been at this for eight months now and -- almost nine, actually, and I'm really excited about it, because, you know, counterinsurgency experts may disagree on many points, but one I think there's just about universal consensus on is that building indigenous capacity is absolutely key to fighting and winning against an insurgency.

So it's rewarding for us, and the -- this is something that the relationships you build as you do this, working alongside the Afghans every day -- it's not us telling them what to do; let me sure you that. This is a partnership. We learn from them. They learn from us. We're not just imposing a U.S. way of doing things here; we're sharing ideas about the best way to do this in this country and looking for a solution that really is tailored to meet the needs and demands of this country, while at the same time giving them a modern sustainable, interoperable capability that they absolutely need, and especially in the way of airpower. We -- this is an indispensable part of their defense capability in the Afghan national security forces, and I'm just -- it's been a tremendous honor to work with them and a very rewarding experience as well.

And I can tell you, from having flown with them and having -- and worked with them for this long, you know, they're good. And they're going to continue to improve, and they're going to get better. And we will get to a point where they will be independent, capable and sustainable.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

GEN. GIVHAN: And thank you again, very much.

LT. CRAGG: Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to cut you off. I thought you were done. I apologize.

GEN. GIVHAN: I was. (Chuckles.)

LT. CRAGG: Oh, great! Okay. Well, with that, thank you, sir, very much for your time. And thank you for the bloggers on the line.

Just a note for everyone, if you want to have a link to this or want to find out more about it, go to the Bloggers section off of Defense Link and

you'll find the audio file, the transcript and a story about today's Bloggers Roundtable.

Again, thank you, sir, and thank you for the bloggers. This ends today's program.

Q Thank you.

GEN. GIVHAN: Thank you.

Q Thank you, ma'am.

Q Thank you.

END.