

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COMBAT CAMERA TEAM MEMBERS STAFF SERGEANT SHAWN WEISMILLER; STAFF SERGEANT STACIA ZACHARY; SENIOR AIRMAN BRIAN ECONOMIDES; AND CAPTAIN PHIL VENTURA TIME: 10:02 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, JULY 7, 2009

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): So with that, I just want to welcome everyone to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, July 7th, 2009. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

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

Now, we have a good group today. They're Air Force combat camera airmen, and they are based out of Combined Air Operations Center. And they've been involved in documenting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Speaking to the bloggers today are the following personnel. And I want to say, if I've messed up on someone's name, I deeply apologize. And let's start with the first person, Staff Sergeant Shawn Weismiller, and a -- he's a photojournalist; Staff Sergeant Stacia Zachary, print journalist; Senior Airman Brian Economides -- thank you, Chuck -- videographer; and then Captain Phil Ventura. He's the combat camera officer in charge.

So what I want to do is I want to turn it over to Captain Ventura, if he'd like to start with an opening statement, and then we'll get the bloggers to ask some of their questions.

So sir, the floor is yours.

CAPT. VENTURA: Thank you very much, ma'am. And I'm going to begin by deferring to Staff Sergeant Zachary. So with that, Sergeant Zachary, if you would.

SGT. ZACHARY: Hi. I'm Staff Sergeant Stacia Zachary from Air Force Central's Combat Camera Team 2. With me today, as you know, is Sergeant Weismiller, Airman Economides and Captain Ventura. And, of course, I round out the team. But before we start taking questions, I want to give you an overview of how our teams are built and then describe our mission while we're deployed here.

We are one of two Air Force Combat Camera teams based here at the Combined Air Operations Center and each team consists of, as you know, a photographer, a videographer and print journalist. We travel across Central Command regularly to document airmen's contributions to the Air Force, to the overseas contingency operation and the impact air power has on Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Our main focus is on the Joint Expeditionary Task Force and Airmen. Our team members are from the First Combat Camera Squadron and they're all aerial qualified, which enables them to fly as air crew and document missions from the sky.

This is a six-month deployment and we've just reached our halfway mark. And since deploying, we have traveled to both Iraq and Afghanistan, and Sergeant Weismiller and I participated in a humanitarian airlift where relief supplies were delivered to Pakistan's Swat Valley.

Some of the stories we've had the opportunity to document are the C-17 combat operate in a remote Afghan combat outpost, some operational missions with the combat, search and rescue teams embedded with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Paktia and Nangarhar provinces, as well as patrolled a local mullah in Baghdad with security forces airmen.

Our imagery and stories have appeared internally on Department of Defense web sites such as af.mil, defenselink.mil, defenseimagery.mil. Our work has also appeared in numerous blogs, international newspapers and television news programs.

It's humbling to see how many outlets use our products; not just for news media. Operational commanders and leaders throughout the Department of Defense rely on it to make informed decisions. Our pictures, videos and stories can often be used for intelligence, reconnaissance, engineering, legal and other operations involving the military services.

We're proud to have the opportunity to shed light on the contributions our fellow airmen bring to this joint, multinational fight. Thank you for allowing us this opportunity to come public about our experiences.

With that, we would like to answer any questions you have. LT. CRAGG: Okay. Thank you for the excellent run down. Let's go with Chuck, and Chuck, you're first. Let's go ahead.

Q Hi, Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal.

As a persistent amateur photographer, I'm curious about the school that you folks attend. What kind of training do you receive in your profession at the school?

SGT. WEISMILLER: Well, Mr. Simmons, I think I'll take that. This is Sergeant Weismiller. And can you hear me clearly?

Q Yes.

SGT. WEISMILLER: Okay. Currently, I'm out of First Combat Camera in Charleston, South Carolina, and I've been a photographer in the military for the last seven years.

Our first -- there are multi-levels of training in the military. Our first level, obviously, starts at the Defense Information School, which is located in Fort Meade, Maryland, and it covers the basics of photography: processing, composition, graphics and getting a general familiarity with the camera, how it works and how to take good pictures.

Upon graduating the Defense Information School, we're sent there to our first assignment. And our first assignment is responsible for giving us upgrade training. And depending on where you're at, there will be different levels of that upgrade training.

I was fortunate enough when I got stationed at Nellis that I had very experienced photographers there. And they gave me a very good foundation on the equipment, how to use it and then how to tell a story with photographs, as best as possible.

Above and beyond that, there's a program called the advanced photojournalism program, which is at Syracuse University. And they select five photographers out of each branch of the military. And they send them to Syracuse to study photojournalism.

I had the privilege of attending that program, as do many of my colleagues at Combat Camera. And it's the same level of training, as any civilian that goes through that program or studies photojournalism at Syracuse. And then beyond that, it's from the experience of photographers within my unit.

Q Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Chuck and Sagar, we're going to keep on going back and forth. If you have follow-on questions, just kind of tag-team, until the other bloggers call in.

Sagar, let's go with you next.

Q Good morning, guys. This is Sagar from horizontalrain.com. And first of all, it's really a pleasure to speak with you guys. Being a fellow photographer, I'm kind of excited. So my first question is for either of the staff sergeants actually.

My question is, how do you guys actually balance documenting the scene and the images versus actually trying to fulfill self-creativity and trying to, you know, be a little bit better than you were in the last, previous group?

SGT. ZACHARY: This is Sergeant Zachary.

As far as answering your question, how do I take what I've learned and make it better? It's a learning process that you never really perfect. Every new environment gives you a new opportunity, and as long as you keep an open mind. And as I like to say, everybody's got a story to tell.

There's numerous potential of stories out there. And I have a really great job that while I am a journalist, I get to experience a little of what everybody else does, by telling their stories. So in a way, I get to be a jack of all trades. And I have a fonder appreciation for what it takes to come together as a team.

SGT. WEISMILLER: To shed light on your question about creativity, you're asking how do we strictly document things, versus taking a creative approach to it? Is that what you're asking, sir?

Q Yeah, basically. I mean I find myself, you know, as a photojournalist, you know, trying to document, versus also self- fulfillment and trying to be creative and, you know, be a photographer and invoke emotion with my images versus just documenting. Do you guys face that challenge?

SGT. WEISMILLER: Yes, to some extent. Our job is to document, but our job is also to tell a story and to tell a compelling story. And throughout my career in the military, we've -- or I've been taught, as well as rest of the photographers in the military, that our job is to tell a story and to tell it with emotion and to tell it in the best light as possible; not to just strictly look through the viewfinder and click the shutter. Every time we take a picture, there's a purpose and there's a direction. That help?

Q Absolutely. Thank you.

CAPT. VENTURA: And another example -- this is Captain Ventura. Another example of that comes from our video side, where we have Airman Economides here.

And I don't know if you can talk a little bit about how you take something that is strictly B-Roll. Is it something that's a creative product for yourself and others? Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

SR. AIRMAN ECONOMIDES: Sure. Airman Economides. We recently went on a combat system rescue mission, and I was able to document it from the ground. And kind of as a self-fulfillment, I wanted to put something together for myself as well as for the combat search and rescue teams that's just a little beyond just the strict documentation of it. So that's what I'm kind of doing, you know, currently. And I guess that's just an example of, you know, how we take our level of work a step further for self-fulfillment.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go back to Chuck.

Q Okay. I'd like to talk equipment, folks. Are you guys fully digital, or are you working with film? And where do you do your editing and uploading and, you know, getting the images out? Do you do that on-site or when you get back to a base? SGT. WEISMILLER: Oh, I guess it depends on the mission. Sometimes we have the resources available to send imagery via a file transfer protocol --

Q Right.

SGT. WEISMILLER: -- of direct (sites ?). Sometimes we simply take Eco -- Eco hands a cassette off, or I'll burn a CD real quick, and we'll send it back on a C-17.

And then it will get hand-delivered to our OIC, who is responsible for transmitting it out from there.

In response to your question about film, I was lucky enough I started out in film. But once I started photography in the military, film was no longer being used. We are strictly -- we're strictly digital.

Would you like to comment on the video side, Eco?

SR. AIRMAN ECONOMIDES: We still use mini-DV, as well as some other things. Some squadrons have started using HD cameras, and we're trying to start swaying away from using tapes and actually going all digital, but I don't see it happening any time in the near future.

SGT. WEISMILLER: And then, as far as the work, whole process after that, I bring all my photos into imaging editing software; and then I'll bring it into Photoshop, tone it up; and then I'll transmit it from there.

Q Okay, and just a quick follow-up on that. I noticed in looking at the various services and the various types of photography involved that the resolutions vary dramatically. One set of photos might be, you know, 3,000 pixels by, you know, 3,000 pixels, and another one is 800 by 600. Is your choice of resolution dictated by the subject, by the request for documentation, or by circumstance?

SGT. WEISMILLER: Well, circumstance plays a large role with that. It's going to vary from photographer to photographer. But as a general rule, we very -- I, at least, very rarely shoot raw, just because I need the memory saved. I'll shoot a very high-quality JPEG file.

And I think maybe the problem you might be running into, sir, is that these various websites of these various people -- I don't know exactly where you're getting the imagery from. But all the imagery that we send out should be sent out as high-res as possible.

Q And I appreciate that. And being from the user side, the high-res, while it's neat to even -- I hate to say this, but crop the photo or highlight a particular area of interest.

SGT. WEISMILLER: Right. CAPT. VENTURA: But a lot of -- this is Captain Ventura. A lot of it would be mission-dependent.

A good example there is the combat offload this team recently covered, where this was a very remote base in Afghanistan there. But this was imagery that had very much a timeliness to it.

So we wanted to get those images and that story out, as close to the event as possible. Whereas some of our stuff can be evergreen typically, this was no-kidding hard news.

So in this case, after the mission, Sergeant Weismiller, no kidding, just went to his civilian account and e-mailed me his couple selects from that mission, in a resolution that was able to get transmitted over, you know, Gmail or whatever it was.

At the same time, Airman Economides sent his tape back with the C-17 pilot. So I had that in hand. And then Sergeant Zachary, in a heroic effort, wrote out her story longhand, until she could get to a morale computer at the next FOB. And she, no kidding, sat there and typed out an e-mail to me.

So that all arrived in my inbox. And I was able to work with our media outreach folks to get that up there within about 12 to 15 hours of the event happening.

And then when they came back from that mission and they, you know, got some rest and took a shower and cleaned up, then Sergeant Weismiller went back and uploaded all of his high-resolution imagery.

Sergeant Zachary had a chance to look at her story again and make some tweaks and, you know, take another look at it. And then Airman Economides was able to take his raw footage and form it into various products.

So it's really dependent upon the mission. But there is one good example of how our workflow can vary, depending on what type of thing we're covering.

Q Great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Robert, do you have any other questions?

Q Absolutely. Just want to follow up on a little bit what Chuck was asking about equipment. Can you tell me, what's the typical loadout for you guys, when you guys go into combat? Like, what would you stuff in your gear? What do you guys normally take with you? Do you wear protection?

I heard some talk about sidearms earlier offline. But, and if at all possible, if you can, give me a scenario. And tell me, you know, for this particular scenario, this is what we would wear and this is what we would carry.

SGT. ZACHARY: Sergeant Zachary.

For me as a journalist, I make sure I have a rucksack with very limited clothing and uniforms in it and a secondary rucksack with my computer, videotape and lots of notepads.

As far as what kind of equipment we take for protection, you need your helmet. You need your body armor. You need to be able to carry a combat load, which is seven M4 magazines and two M9s. And then you also carry your sidearm.

So at any given point, I weigh 110 pounds; I'm carrying 150 pounds on me. So we travel with a lot of gear.

But Sergeant Weismiller has a bag that is a beast. (Laughter.) And I applaud him every time he lugs that thing around with all his equipment. And he has more information on what he carries around.

SGT. WEISMILLER: She covered most of it. I bring one -- I'd like to bring two camera bodies most of the time, but more often than not I run into a situation where I can only afford to carry one camera body, just because we carry so much gear as it is.

But I carry a variety of lenses so I can cover, you know, anything -- (audio break) -- long to a wide angle. And then I need a computer, obviously, to edit my imagery and to transmit it. It gets -- it gets taxing bringing all the gear around three different theaters, but we manage. And we work together as a team pretty well, carrying one another's stuff when we need to.

CAPT. VENTURA: This is Captain Ventura here. One very important thing to us when we go into a situation is that we look right, because that goes a lot towards being accepted onto a mission. If we're going to go to a security-forces squadron and ask to go on a combat patrol with them, if we don't look

right, they're less likely to allow that. But we focus very much on being an asset and not a liability to those that we work with, and our gear lends ourselves to that, as does the training we show up with. So that is a huge enabler to our mission. So I don't know if this is now the time to talk about training too, but --

SR. AIRMAN ECONOMIDES (?): Yeah, I guess to add on to that -- is -- we sort of are a very varied role in theater. We're attached to anybody, from air crew to infantrymen. And we need to be able to basically have a good impression or set a precedent every time we go into a different crew. And all these different crews, they'll -- they wear their required level of protection, and we have to fit in and be able to be -- adapt or -- malleable to the subject that we're covering. And I hope that that answers your question.

SGT. ZACHARY: One more thing I think worth noting is that when we go out, we have a mission to perform as combat cameramen. But more than that, we go out as airmen, and we have to be ready to fulfill that role. So we're always prepared as airmen, and we do our job while we're being airmen. They're really -- there's -- that's our first role, is sort of provide safety to the people we're with, as far as get the mission done as well.

Q Sergeant Weismiller, I've got a follow-up question for you as a photographer. You mentioned you carry one body and a bunch of lenses. Can you go a little bit more in-depth into what that would be like, say, if you were on a combat patrol or sort of outside the safe zone?

SGT. WEISMILLER: Okay. Well, I have a --

Q (Please be ?) actually specific, like what lenses you actually take or what kind of body you use.

SGT. WEISMILLER: I have a D3, which -- I don't have a D3X, but I have the D3, which is an excellent camera because its ISO sensitivity helps me out a lot when I'm dealing with low-light situations.

As far as lenses, I bring a 70 to 200, and I bring a 28 to 70, 14 mil, and I also bring a teleconverter with me. I also have a 24 to 120, that I actually (use ?) every now and then. But those are the lenses that I bring with me.

Do you want to know the speed on those, whether they were 3.5's or 1.8's, or is that enough?

Q If you know it off the top of your head. And the other one, do you guys use flash? Like, safety, is that a concern?

SGT. WEISMILLER??: Well, I use flash as little as possible. I love natural light. And then when you're doing operations, a lot of the times you're just not allowed to use flash, especially if you're doing a night operation, because, one, if you're using night vision, it's going to interfere with the night vision; two, it draws attention to yourself, and you don't want to do that.

So in the rare instances -- there are very rare instances in which we use flash. Maybe if, you know, the light's a little too harsh between the highlights and the shadows, if I need a little bit of fill and I have the time,

I'll use it. But again, it's very rare. I use what God's given me at that point.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Before I turn it over, we have time for a couple more questions. So do either one of the bloggers have any other follow-on questions?

Q I do. LT. CRAGG: Okay. Keep on going.

Q Okay. Two quick questions. The first is, how are your missions generated? Where do you get that direction from? And the second question is, when I see a photo on DBITS (ph), for example, of night vision, how do you take that picture? Is that a special camera, special lens? How do you get a night-vision image?

CAPT. VENTURA: This is Captain Ventura. In terms of where the missions are generated from -- and full disclosure here: I've been on this beat just about a month, so I'm still kind of getting my feet on completely solid ground. And my answer to you is that of course it depends. A high-visibility mission like delivering humanitarian goods into Pakistan's Swat valley -- in the case of that, that was a request handed down by the director of mobility forces here at the CAOC or the (DERMOT 4 ?). And they wrote that right into the mission plan, and we were -- we had a very specific mission set for that.

A lot of other missions are generated through networking, requests, our keeping our ears to the ground in terms of -- no kidding -- where are our jet airmen making a contribution in theater right now. And what's amazing about us being based at the CAOC is that we have amazing access to air flow, and we're able to get to where we need to be reasonably within a matter of days.

So it really -- it just really depends. It can be anything from (locating ?) -- we are built in and a part of the mission to, you know, coming from the public affairs realm. We serve quite a few customers, and they all are familiar with requesting us. So again, it depends. But we stay busy. That's for sure.

SGT./AIRMAN : And the night-vision question?

Q Yeah. Yeah.

CAPT./SGT. : Eco, are you familiar when you -- with what you used doing night-vision documentation?

SR. AIRMAN ECONOMIDES: I believe it's an Astroscope, but I'm too sure.

Well, I know video -- video has a night vision (tapped ?) into their cameras as well as still photographers. I have an AstroScope, which is a night-vision lens for my camera. And it simply takes ambient light and increases it so we can get (a suitable ?) image out of it.

There have been instances where I simply took night-vision lenses that you use to see and I have rigged it to the front of my lens and taken pictures that way.

Q Okay. Great. Thank you. CAPT. VENTURA: Yeah, to return to the question about how our missions are generated, one other thing to add in there is that our capability that's very unique that we bring to theater is our

ability to be part of air crew and to provide coverage of the aerial airpower mission.

Now, across the AOR, we are the only team qualified to do that. So a lot of times, you might find a shop -- say, down in Kandahar -- where they have something very interesting going on, but their local photographers, videographers and journalists are not trained and capable of getting on that helicopter.

A recent example was this team covering the combat, search and rescue mission out of Afghanistan. Those are real-world, dangerous, highly dynamic missions that you don't throw somebody on because they want to get a neat picture. That's the type of mission that you request Combat Camera for, because we have the training, we have the capability to go on there and, again, like I said earlier, be an asset to that mission versus a liability. So a lot of times, we're requested specifically for that capability.

Q Yeah, and I would be remiss in not pointing out there have been a couple of Air Force cameramen that have received medals for valor, because they dropped their camera and took up other duties.

CAPT. VENTURA: Yes, there have been. And that's one of those decisions that -- what a terrible decision to have to make, you know, that moment when you drop your camera, videocamera -- or, you know, notepad, in our journalist's case -- and pick up your arms. But I think, like Sergeant Zachary said earlier, we all are airmen first, and we are there to enhance the mission, whether that means taking imagery, taking a story or fighting back.

You know self-aid buddy care is another huge part of that. All our team members can provide self-aid buddy care along with the best of them and take care of anybody on that team. And that's something we're very proud of and we train to very seriously.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: With that, we're running pretty much out of time with about three minutes. And I know that Staff Sergeant Zachary had provided the opening statement, but I wanted to make sure -- Captain Ventura, did you want to do the closing statement, or do you want to --

CAPT. VENTURA: Yes, ma'am, that would be great.

And thank you all for an interest in what we do. We are very passionate about it. And the documentation role that we serve is very important. So there's a lot of this content that we create that is available for you guys to see online. As was mentioned up front, defenseimagery.mil is a great resource; digitpub.net (sp) is very good. Shawn and I are both from the First Combat Camera Squadron, and we are on Facebook. And that's just [Facebook.com/airforcecombatcamera](https://www.facebook.com/airforcecombatcamera).

We also have a lot of our imagery and video on YouTube. And we're on Twitter now, if you'd like to follow us through that.

And again, if you have, really, anything, please go ahead and e-mail me, if you'd like, at just philip (sp) dot ventura at auav.afcent.af.mil. And thank you so much for covering a lot of our work. We love -- we search the blogs every week, and it's always a pleasure to see our work out there in your domain.

SGT./SR. AIRMAN : My mom saw the pictures on your site, Mr. Simmins, and she loved them. So thank you.

Q Oh, good! (Chuckles.) Always like to make the moms happy. (Laughter.)

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Mr. Simmins, as well. I've never called you that.

So with that, I just wanted to say thank you for everyone for participating in today's roundtable.

Of note, a transcript from this call as well as the audio file and a story will be posted on DefenseLink on the Bloggers link. You -- feel free to go to that site and take any of those items that you want. And if any of the bloggers on the line want additional pictures, I'll just put them in touch with Kim (sp) or Francis (sp). Is that okay? If you're still on the line.

Q (Perfect ?).

LT. CRAGG: With that, again, I want to thank everyone for participating. And this ends today's roundtable. Thank you again.

Q Thank you.

Q Thanks.

END.