



HAWG 55

A Superb Display Of Combat And Risk Management

A REAL LIFE STORY WRITTEN BY COL J. ALAN MARSHALL

In June 2009, Major Kevin Eilers led a two-ship of A-10s (call-sign Hawg 55) on a combat mission in Afghanistan. Hawg 55 was tasked with armed over-watch of coalition forces on Highway 1. Approximately 35 minutes into the sortie, Hawg 55 was re-tasked to a troops-in-contact (TIC) situation about 74 miles east of their location where the lead vehicle of a U.S. patrol had hit an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). The remaining five vehicles in the convoy immediately came under sustained small



Photo by: Capt Justin T. Watson



Photo by: SrA Christina D. Ponte

arms fire, and the convoy Platoon Leader (Captain John Miles) deployed a QRF (quick reaction force) led by Staff Sergeant Jackson, who called for air support. Additional convoy NCO's, Staff Sergeants Murray and Stackman set up defensive firing positions.

The TIC was located on a valley floor of about 8,000 feet MSL (mean sea level) surrounded by mountain ridges up to 15,000 feet MSL on the west, south and north. A cloud deck started at about 10,000 feet MSL and went all the way up to 17,000 feet MSL. This only allowed about 2,000 feet of clearance between the valley floor and the cloud bottoms which made the canyon look like a horseshoe with a lid on it. The only way the A-10 pilots could safely enter the valley was by flying below the weather from the west and carefully picking their way through the low points in the terrain. Knowing that the box canyon geometry was too small to safely maneuver a formation with only 2,000 feet of clearance, Major Eilers decided to split his formation by placing his Wingman above the weather and terrain at 17,000 feet while he would remain below the weather and enter the valley alone. This would allow his Wingman, Hawg 56 (Major Kevin Davidson), to maintain situational awareness and act as a communications relay while Hawg 55 (lead) would be able to visually support the troops on the ground.

Due to flying below the mountain ridges, Hawg 55 was unable to make radio contact with the nearest JTAC (joint terminal attack controller) and relied on Hawg 56 to relay approval for the rare Type III control (JTAC not in visual contact with aircraft or target). Type III control would be required to defend the isolated friendly troops on the ground. For Type III close air support (CAS) a JTAC is required for coordination and approval of the expending of ordnance by Air Force aircraft, and the convoy had no JTAC or even JFO (joint fires observer) assigned. The only radio contact that Hawg 55 had with the patrol was with "Enforcer 22" who was a turret gunner in one of the patrol gun trucks (Specialist Maloney-Diamond). After making two low passes over the distressed convoy, Hawg 55 had visual contact with two enemy fighting positions firing on the convoy. Enforcer 22 confirmed that indeed the enemy was firing from those locations and that all friendly personnel were located with the convoy of vehicles. Enforcer 22 also updated Hawg 55 on the situation: The patrol had three KIA (killed in action) and was taking continuous fire from enemy forces less than 200 meters to the south.

After receiving the relayed approval for Type III CAS from Hawg 56 and being unable to set up a normal strafe run due to the weather and terrain, Hawg 55 improvised from his current position and made an initial strafe pass



Photo by: SrA Joshua Strang

firing his 30mm gun at 10 to 15 enemy personnel less than 200 meters from the patrol. Enforcer 22 relayed the results with glee and then asked for an additional pass. Meanwhile, Hawg 56 was struck by lightning while dodging thunder clouds above but remained on station to coordinate for the medivac removal of wounded personnel. Hawg 55 circled back to put 30mm fire even closer to friendly forces than on his first pass. The deadly, accurate fire drew much "rejoicing" from the turret gunner on the ground, and enemy fire on the patrol immediately ceased. Hawg 55 flight circled over the patrol until two HH-60 helicopters arrived to remove the wounded from the battlefield. While coordinating for the rejoin of the

flight, the A-10s departed the area due to a hail storm that had moved in over the valley.

Beyond the heroic accomplishments of Hawg 55 flight on that June day

that helped save the lives of 22 brothers-in-arms on the ground, several risk management decisions should be highlighted. First, Hawg 55 had to balance the benefits of engaging an enemy force that was actively attacking friendly troops with the risks of operating in a box type canyon capped by weather. Major Eilers decided that the benefit (saving friendly lives) outweighed the risks; however, he mitigated those risks by separating his flight, thus reducing the required airspace and task loading

while maintaining his operational capability. Hawg 56 (the Wingman) had to balance the risks of operating near a thunderstorm with the benefits of coordinating for a medivac and acting as a communication relay. Hawg 55 flight later reduced the risks associated with operating near severe weather by leaving the area when those risks outweighed the operational benefits. The excellent use of operational risk management principles by Hawg 55 Flight represent a real world example of how ORM can be used by Airmen routinely in air operations and how close air support can save lives on the ground.

Where are they now? Major Kevin Eilers is currently serving as the Chief of Wing Inspections, 23rd Wing, Moody AFB, GA. Major Kevin Davidson (the Wingman) is currently attending the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, CA, where he is studying for an upcoming assignment in South Korea. The unit supported on the ground was the 549th Military Police Company, 385th Battalion, Fort Stewart, GA. Captain John Miles (the Platoon Leader) is currently attending the MP Captain's course at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. Specialist Maloney-Diamond was awarded the Army Commendation Medal with Valor for his unusual close-air support coordination that day and is currently serving in the 385th Battalion Headquarters in Fort Stewart, GA. Staff Sergeants Jackson, Murray and Stackman were all awarded Army Commendation Medals for their actions and are currently serving at Fort Stewart, GA.

