

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH U.S. AIR FORCE COLONEL ERIC HOLDAWAY, AFCENT/AFFOR DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE (A-2) SUBJECT: GETTING INSIDE THE ENEMY'S DECISION CYCLE WITH ISR; NEW INFORMATION-GATHERING CAPABILITIES BEING USED TO MONITOR, TRACK AND TARGET THE ENEMY TIME: 9:58 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2009

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Okay, and hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, April 23rd, 2009.

My name is Petty Officer William Selby, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct. Today, our guest is U.S. Air Force Colonel Eric Holdaway, AFCENT/AFFOR Director of Intelligence. And the topic is -- Colonel Holdaway will discuss getting inside the enemy's decision cycle with IRS (sic), and new information-gathering capabilities using -- being used to monitor, track and target the enemy.

And Colonel Holdaway, if you have any opening remarks, you should go ahead with that now.

(Cross talk.)

Colonel Holdaway, are you there, sir?

COL. HOLDAWAY: Yes, I am.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. If you want to, go ahead and start with your opening remarks.

COL. HOLDAWAY: Okay. Good morning.

I want to start with just a quick overview of, you know, the purpose of Air Force intelligence, what we're doing out here, a little bit of where we are. in the fight, how we see that problem that we need to work, the problems we need to solve, for our commanders and the folks we support. And then I'll just -- I'll open it up to questions.

The purpose of all intelligence is to help our commanders get ahead of the enemy's decision cycle, so that we, you know, we are able to anticipate what they are likely to do, keep the initiative and achieve our campaign objectives.

There's quite a bit of Air Force intelligence support going on, as folks who talk to the supported commands, ground commanders, the multi-national commands and operate them quickly understand.

There's the traditional intelligence function of analysis, of reporting on the battlefield situation, trying to understand the battlefield situation and again trying to predict what the enemy is likely to do. But there's also the ISR operations piece, which we do quite a bit of, the majority of course of theater ISR capabilities, by the Air Force, both here in theater and in the CONUS.

We have the very expensive distributed common ground station, the DCGS, within the CONUS, that does, within the continental U.S. and also overseas, in Germany and Hawaii, that does processing, exploitation and dissemination, which we abbreviate as PED, for all of the intelligence collection, for a lot of the intelligence collection, excuse me, from our airborne platforms. Once you've flown the aircraft, you've taken the image or collected the signal, that's really only the beginning of the work. What turns that raw collect into actionable intelligence is PED. And so we do an awful lot of that through the DCGS.

We also have intelligence airmen on what we call joint expeditionary taskings. You may have heard these previously referred to as ILO or in lieu of taskings, for example, performing such functions as weapons intelligence teams, with the counter-IED task forces, in helping and assisting the ground forces, with interrogation of detainees, and then a few other things which unfortunately I'm not allowed to talk about.

Once you -- you know, we have a number of Air Force airmen in joint billets. We have a number performing this PED function at various stations in the U.S. and overseas. Once you've subtracted those folks out, the rest are available for deployment to the theater.

But right now we're so heavily tapped that those folks are on what we call a one-to-one deployment/dwell, which means they can expect to be downrange for six months or a year, go home for an equivalent period of time, and they can expect to then be deployed again. So, you know, the intelligence airmen are very much in demand.

Earlier in my career, you know, the problem was to be able to place ordnance anywhere in the world very accurately and in any weather at any time. We've solved that. The problem we deal with now is much more complex, with enemies that, you know, not only hide amongst the population but also will open fire on our ground forces from amongst the population. So characterizing how they operate, trying to understand them, becomes even more important.

So that's just -- I think just kind of a quick, you know, precis of how I see the Air Force intelligence role over here, and I'm happy to take your questions.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir. And did somebody else join us while he was giving his opening statement?

Q Yeah. Greg Grant here.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay.

Q Now, for the bloggers, everybody's going to get a chance to ask at least one question, but we do have quite a few bloggers on the line today, so just ask your one question, and then if we have time for follow-ups we'll go with that.

And David, you were first, so you can go ahead.

David Axe, are you there?

Q I'm here. Hi. (Inaudible).

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay.

Q So hi, this is David Axe with War Is Boring. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us today. So can you -- the recent -- a lot of the recent big budget decisions by Secretary Gates have highlighted the importance of ISR. And one of the sort of ISR systems that he highlighted was this Task Force ODIN thing the Army runs, which, best I understand it, lashes up ISR and troops on the ground and weapons delivery in a really tidy little package.

Is that Task Force ODIN model of doing things -- is that something the Air Force is embracing and moving towards? You know, is that a model for the way that ISR is going to sort of function in the overall system moving forward?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I would say that TF ODIN is a -- it's a good model for ISR for a fairly specific mission, which is what they've been given. As you know, TF ODIN's origins were in the counter-IED defeat organization. And they've developed a very strong capability for working very closely with a brigade combat team in -- to work a specific problem.

The Air Force's obligations tend to be broader. If you go back even to the origins of the Air Force in the Key West Agreement, you know, we're required to provide tactical reconnaissance support -- and now that has of course expanded to ISR support -- to the Army and now to the theater commanders.

So we find that our -- you know, our to-do list that we get given by Central Command in order to support the various commands tends to be broader and more general. So I think honestly that there's a very good complement between TF ODIN and what the air component brings to theater ISR.

Q What is that TF ODIN does that is sort of educational to the Air Force's ISR efforts?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I think we've seen -- and we've certainly seen how they lash up with the brigade. But again, as an organic core asset, that's really their lane. We're a theater asset. Our ISR is a theater asset. Air Force ISR isn't organic to anyone, to include, by the way, the Air Force. It's a theater asset.

So you know, I think we -- we've certainly -- we've learned a lot from them on how to support within a specific mission set, but you know, we tend to also operate with them. They're doing that. And we -- given our theater responsibilities.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

Q Okay. Thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Chuck, you're next. Q Hi. Good morning. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. With the -- regarding the theater aspect of the intelligence gathering, our current foes are rather disparate and disorganized right at this point in time.

How do you go about mounting a get-inside-their-head campaign, when they're so scattered and broken?

COL. HOLDAWAY: Can you repeat the question? I'm trying to understand exactly what you're --

Q Well, yeah, you know -- one of the things that I gather that your office is -- does is kind of getting into the thought processes of the enemy leadership and trying to anticipate what they're doing. Our current enemy has been scattered; leadership is in disarray. How do you -- how do you go about --

COL. HOLDAWAY: I got it. Yes, I understand. And you're talking specifically about the insurgents in Iraq or Afghanistan, or both?

Q Well, I think what I said kind of applies to both so --

COL. HOLDAWAY: Okay. Well, I think the first step is -- you know, and a big background to everything we do is we have to place it in the right cultural context. You know, when we try to mirror-image these adversaries, like as if they were Westerners, I think we make a big mistake. They come from their own cultural -- they come from their own cultural context. And some of them, especially if you look at the Walli code in Afghanistan, they have a long history, a very long history of working this way. So the first thing is, we do try to look at it in the proper cultural context.

You know, the second thing is, I think we've seen -- and this is very different from the wars we saw, for example, in Southeast Asia, the guerrilla wars in Southeast Asia or Latin America, where they tended to have some central political control. You look, certainly, at Iraq; you have a number of groups that operate kind of, you know, with their own agendas. And you have to understand them in that context and look at each group, where they come from, who their leaders are, what their -- you know, what their agendas are and, frankly, who's their constituency and whom do they seek to represent.

So I -- it's definitely different from dealing with an organization like the Viet Cong or the NLF in Algeria, where you had a very central political leadership. And we really need to look at each group within the movement on its own terms.

Q Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Tech Sergeant Randolph, you were next on the line.

Q Yes, sir. This is Tech Sergeant Monique Randolph from Air Force Public Affairs. Sir, this is kind of for the internal audience. You mentioned the one-to-one dwell for the intel airmen on deployments and also the airmen

serving in the form of "in lieu of" or JET authorizations. I'm just wondering, what do you foresee as the future of those types of assignments, the frequency of deployments and that kind of thing? Is this something that -- I mean, are these non-traditional airmen assignments going eventually just become what we do or what's kind of the future? What's your outlook on that?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I think there -- I think there are two -- there are two ongoing developments that are going to have a big influence on that. The first is, as the Army plusses up, you know, by 80,000 more soldiers, you know, a lot of those JET taskings are doing things that the Army simply didn't have the manpower to do. So I would think that, you know, one of the first orders of business for the Army would be to flesh out the BCTs, the brigade combat teams, with all of the skill sets that they need to do soldier things and, again, become more organically, you know, kind of unified, you know, going ahead with those. So I think some of those JET taskings should actually fall off as the Army gets healthier for trained, experienced manpower.

The second thing we're doing is we're looking at the specialties within Air Force intelligence. And some of -- you know, based on what some of the duties some of our folks did, by their specialty they really weren't subject to deployment; other folks, more often. We're merging some of those, so we're going to open up the pool.

And, you know, when I was a commander, very few of my airmen were subject to deployment, and a lot of them wanted to deploy. So I think by enlarging the pool, we should be able to -- it would make -- still be the one-to-one dwell, but it won't be the same people going over and over. And then third piece -- the third piece of that is, you know, we kind of -- we're almost in a Navy paradigm now in our career field where being in the joint assignment's kind of like a shore tour and being in the deployable assignment is kind of like a sea tour. So, you know, maybe there's a possibility of deliberate assignment policy, where, you know, for choosing a two-year assignment, you're vulnerable to deployment, and then once that's over, maybe you go into sanctuary for a couple years and get an opportunity to catch up and breathe again and do the kind of development things that our folks need to do before it's your -- next your turn to be in that deployment seat.

Q Okay. Can I ask a quick follow-on?

Just about the specialties that you were talking about kind of expanding, would that include perhaps linguists, who are in a pretty specified peripheral? Maybe they'd be able to expand their skill sets, to do other things as well.

COL. HOLDAWAY: Linguist of course tends to be a tough one, because they tend to be fully employed, you know, where they are. There may be some -- you know, certainly some language sets would be in demand downrange. And those folks could be deployed. And I think we've done some of that, with some linguists doing non-language jobs downrange.

So I think it is something we'd have to look at, you know, on a language-by-language basis, and look at the health. You know, how healthy are we in that language? And can we afford to let people deploy?

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Captain Fishman, you were next on the line.

Q Great.

Thank you, sir, for your time and your service. Can you talk a little bit to the specific conditions in Iraq today? Obviously we're seeing quite a swing, uptick in suicide bombings, in attacks, casualty figures in the last two to three weeks. But what's the assessment about what's happening here?

COL. HOLDAWAY: Well, I kind of like to approach this from the political and social side of it, because I think that's really -- you know, if we look at, you know, the future of Iraq, it really depends on the cohesion -- (inaudible) -- in terms of the Iraqi people themselves.

The one thing, I think, that's been remarkable, just in the last couple years, has been the growth in confidence of the Iraqi government. You know, Prime Minister Maliki; there was a lot of concern early on. Was he strong enough? He wasn't -- he seemed not to be the first choices of the Dawa party.

I think he has really established himself. Certainly the showing of the Dawa party, in the provincial elections, shows his leadership has been very strong. So I think politically the government is doing a lot better than some people expected two years ago.

The second one is, in terms of cohesion, many Sunni Iraqis and many Shi'a Iraqis; it seems like, in 2006-2007, they looked over the edge of this sectarian warfare abyss and didn't like what they saw.

We certainly saw that in the growth of the Sahwa movement, the Sons of Iraq, in throwing al Qaeda out of Anbar. And interestingly enough in the provincial elections, the parties that did the best were ones that took an Iraqi nationalist line. And those that campaigned on their friendship with Iran seemed not to do very well.

So I think there's more cohesion now, amongst the Iraqi people, than we saw earlier on in, you know, 2004-2005. And it may just be how it appears. It may have always been there. I suspect it always was. But it's certainly showing itself.

And then finally the Iraqi security forces, every operation, they're performing with more confidence and with more skill.

You know, if you look at even as recently as a year ago, with Operation Charge of the Knights in Basra -- which, you know, based on how it's portrayed in the press, was portrayed as a disaster -- apparently, for the Iraqi army it was anything but. They've gone from strength to strength. And I think, you know, it allows the role of the U.S. armed forces to move to much more of an advisory role.

And of course, at the end of the day, that's the -- you know, that is the victory criteria, which is an Iraqi government, you know, representing the Iraqi people, standing on its own and supported by its own security forces.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir. And Noah Shachtman?

Q Colonel, thanks for being here. It's Noah Shachtman with Wired Magazine. I want to ask you about an incident that CENTCOM announced in their press release on February 17th of this year, an air strike in the Gozara

district in Herat province. Initially, it was called a precision strike, and initially said that up to 15 militants were killed. Later on, it was determined that in fact 13 civilians and only three militants were killed.

I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about what you guys in the CAOC did, sort of leading up to that, building up the intelligence to that, and, you know, what you've learned from that incident, if anything, and, you know, how you guys are doing things differently now.

COL. HOLDAWAY: Noah, I wish I could. That was a target that wasn't developed by our intelligence section. It was developed by another -- another command. So I really can't speak on their processes.

Q Uh-huh. And which command was that?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I'm -- I'm not at liberty to say. That's really -- it would be for them to say.

Q Uh-huh. Okay. Well, then, since that question didn't work out, can we -- can you take us -- just take us through sort of step by step -- take the most recent, you know, air strike pre-planned operation you guys have done? You know, can you sort of take us step by step about how you developed that target and how you made a decision to either, you know, shoot or not shoot in the end? COL. HOLDAWAY: I can talk it, I think, in general terms. You know, this is -- this fight becomes much like, you know, what the Army used to call a rear area security operation. So, you know, we're called in for an air strike. It's in battle space that is -- you know, that is under the control of a friendly ground commander. And so we're going to work very closely with that ground commander. And they're the ones who tend to have their lists of targets and develop the targets. We then will then, you know, provide ISR support as they work through that.

So they'll try to merge together, to the best of their ability, HUMINT reports. They do source operations, any kind of tips that they get. They'll try to develop what they call patterns of life on certain individuals. We use a lot of the full-motion video from platforms like Shadow and Predator and Warrior Alpha to do that kind of work, and try to be very, very patient in doing that.

And this -- that really helps. The more you can characterize the target's activity in this pattern of life analysis, the more you reduce those unknowns. You know, is there likely to be someone in that building he went into that is a non-combatant, or not? Or can we get this guy out in the open in a place where it's -- you know, it's him and his driver in a car, or maybe just him in a car or on a motorbike, and there's -- you know, really reduce the potential for harm to non-combatants.

We've done -- we did some air strikes recently -- I think you may have read about them -- in the southern part of Diyala province, where some al Qaeda fighters were actually killed in fighting positions. And that was really the result of close cooperation between the air component providing ISR capability and then the battlespace owner, the brigade combat team commander and his intelligence staff doing a very good pattern of life analysis of the targets.

Does that answer your question?

Q Sort of. I mean, it seemed that you were sort of putting everything in the -- in the ground commander's hands, but, I mean, the way I understand it is that at the CAOC you guys were doing some pretty sophisticated intelligence fusion. You're, you know, making a lot of calls about possibilities for civilian casualties. So I was hoping you could go through that a little bit more.

COL. HOLDAWAY: Certainly. We would -- you know, based on what our sensors were telling us and, of course, you know, there's a -- there's a duty and a responsibility of everybody in the kill chain, you know, if they believe that there's potential for non-combatant casualties to speak up.

So we will do a -- if -- we'll do a collateral damage estimate of the target, based on where the target is, what is near it and the destructive potential of the weapon that we're planning to employ. And then based on the rules of engagement -- you know, the rules of engagement determine what level of -- what level of risk, you know, we can take. Ideally, like I said, we want to get a guy out in the open where there's no potential for non-combatant casualties or collateral damage.

So a lot of the discussion ends up being between the folks in -- here in the CAOC, the supported commander and sometimes Central Command on the -- on that collateral damage estimate, and so -- you know, why we believe that the potential is high and you shouldn't strike this target, for example -- and that informs that discussion.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And has anybody else not asked a question yet?

Q Greg Grant here, from Military.com. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay, Greg, go ahead.

Q Yeah. A little while back, Secretary Gates kind of publicly chastised the Air Force for not getting aerial drones and other ISR into the theater quickly enough. And I wonder if you could touch a bit about what kind of progress has been made and specifically about the eastern border of Afghanistan.

Obviously, there's not enough troops to cover that border, and it's a porous border. So what are you doing as far as overhead surveillance? What percentage of that border are you able to cover and monitor?

And also, I'd be curious to hear your take on, when you do see potential militants crossing the border, at what level can you -- or when are you clear to fire, if you will? What kind of positive identification do you need to be able to drop a bomb on their heads?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I'll take the first part first. I'll be honest with you, I was a little taken aback. You know, on SECDEF, he's got a broader perspective than mine out here in the theater. But since the early part of -- or the mid-part of 2007, we've increased the overhead ISR capability in Iraq by 150 percent, and by over 200 percent in Afghanistan. And these were things that were in the works, you know, for a very long time prior to 2008. You know, I cut my teeth in the first Gulf war, where we had, you know, maybe four or five reconnaissance aircraft airborne at any one time throughout the theater. And

that's a drop in the bucket compared to what we can do now. So we've -- you know, we've increased the number of aircraft.

We've increased the number of airmen primarily who are doing that exploitation. We've called up some Air National Guard squadrons on two-year mobilization orders. They're mobilizing at home, which to me is a tremendous Air National Guard mission. You know, for most of those folks who live in the local area, they don't have to leave their families, they don't have to leave their neighborhoods, they just wear a different-colored suit in the morning and, you know, they take a different route to work. And they're doing great things for us. They're doing tremendous work.

And we're in the process of kind of a rolling process, so when the first Guard units that were called up have to stand down, we can bring some more on line and sustain that capability.

We're in the process now of adding more MQ-9 Reapers, and we're going to continue to do that. And there's a very good reason for that. The Reaper can carry more. It can do more than the Predator can. So I think we're going to gain more capability in the long run as we -- you know, it may be a similar number of aircraft, but we're going to put more sensors and more capability in the field with the Reaper than we ever could with Predator. So I think that's helpful, as well. The eastern border of Afghanistan is a tremendously difficult -- you know, difficult problem. When I was an undergraduate in college studying the Soviet effort in the 40th army in Afghanistan, I think the number we used was 278 distinct mountain passes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And, you know, we know the nature of the area, the tribes that live on both sides of the border, for whom the border is more theoretical than anything -- they know their tribe -- and going back and forth, which makes it a very difficult task, not only to detect, but then to identify is that a -- are those militants crossing the border, are those smugglers crossing the border, or is that just, you know, members of a tribe going from one part of their tribal territory to another part of their tribal territory?

And I won't go into specifics, because I -- that would give away, unfortunately, sources and methods. But I would say that, you know, the folks who live there are probably the best -- you know, the best qualified to understand it. The more we understand them, the better we're going to understand what's going on. And I think our ground units that work in that area, who live there, who patrol there, who get to know the locals and spend a lot of time there, you know, as we talk to them and share knowledge and understanding, I think that improves our ability to, you know, to control traffic across that border.

Q So do you have to have a positive ID from a ground unit before you can drop a bomb?

COL. HOLDAWAY: We have to have some form of positive ID before we can engage.

Q Could you also just say quickly what -- if you could, the number of airframes you've got operating over there and what -- you said you're going to add more Reapers. What -- can you be a little more specific about numbers?

COL. HOLDAWAY: No, I really can't go into that.

Q Okay. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And we have some time for a few follow-up questions before we do the closing, so --

Q Hello?

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Hello?

Q Hello? Yeah --

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Is this --

Q I'm sorry -- I got here late. I'm sorry.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Oh, I'm sorry. Who's this?

Q This is Marc Schanz of the Air Force Magazine. I'm sorry. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Oh. Okay, Marc, if you could go ahead and ask your -- you haven't asked a question yet, so if you want to go ahead, go ahead with that.

Q I apologize. Real quick, Colonel, could you talk a little bit about how the Reaper and Predator surge, more specifically into Afghanistan, is affecting any tactics and operations? Have you observed them doing anything different? Have they altered, you know -- you know, patterns, I guess from a top-down perspective? And also on that point, what effect is the deployment of the Liberty ship program going to have on, you know, how you collect ISR and how you deploy those Predator and Reaper assets?

COL. HOLDAWAY: Certainly. I'll tell you, the -- you know, if I were an insurgent commander, you know, I would be very, very -- you know, the Predator and the Reaper would be two aircraft I would not be very pleased with. You know, they stay on station for a very long time. They -- you know, we can be extraordinarily patient with these aircraft, and we are.

I think that it's -- you know, it's -- and we see this with -- in general, you know, with air power going all the way back to the Battle of the Bulge: You know, our enemies know that when the weather is really, really horrible is when we're least likely to employ air power. You know, the hard part for the insurgents in Afghanistan is, when the weather's really, really horrible, it's really horrible, and it's hard -- you know, it's hard for them to get around as well.

But the -- you know, we still see these guys come out. You know, we see them -- you know, we see them engage our forces. Unfortunately, their counter-tactic against our air power in some cases seems to be to use noncombatants as human shields. Not all their commanders are doing this, but we have evidence of at least some that are.

And, you know, the -- you know, you'd almost call it Taliban air defense. I mean, they can't engage our aircraft. They can't prevent us -- they have not been able to prevent us from using them, even though they've tried by rocketing our airfields and trying to shoot at our aircraft. You know, so unfortunately, they -- it seems like at least some of them want to try to prevent us using air power, which they -- you know, they -- which they definitely fear, by trying to cause the -- you know, some of them either trying to or -- to cause the death of civilians, or just being indifferent to the death of civilians.

The MC-12, when we bring that online, is going to add some very good capability. You know, we don't have -- you know, any aircraft has weight restrictions, but you don't have quite the weight limitations that you have with a UAS, so we can put some more in there.

With the cabin size, you know, you can put different things in and maybe there's some ability to scale it.

And then, as a manned aircraft, it's going to -- and just with the King Air's capabilities, you know, it's going to fly a little faster, a little higher. And as a manned aircraft, we'd be able to fly it in more marginal weather than we can with the MQ-1 or the MQ-9. So we're really looking forward to getting that one in theater.

Q Really quickly, on the MC-12 --

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Actually -- well, go ahead.

Q Sure. Are you -- have you already worked at deploying the intel dissemination teams forward, the people who are going to work with, you know, processing and analyzing all the intelligence gathered from these airframes, or is that basically done -- are most of the guys still back home?

COL. HOLDAWAY: Well, we're in the process of doing that right now.

Q Okay.

COL. HOLDAWAY: For the support of the first reconnaissance -- the reconnaissance squadron that's going to have the first MC-12s, those (exploiters?), they're -- right now we're building up their equipment and installing it. And then once that's ready, we're going to start to flow those individuals in to take up their -- to take up their positions.

Q Great.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. Thank you. And we have time for maybe two follow-up questions. Was there anybody who did not have a chance to ask a follow-up?

Q Yeah, I -- Greg Grant, here. I liked your characterization of the Taliban air defense. And I'm just curious if you've seen anything a bit more high-tech, any MANPAD threat or even small arms that you're seeing in theater?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I'm glad you characterized it, you know, as compared to what the mujaheddin employed against the Soviets. It's no where near as capable, on a lot of levels. So, you know, we see a lot of small arms. You know, we see some, you know, what you'd call infantry support weapons like machine guns. You know, they shoot RPGs at helicopters, which we've seen in a lot of places in the world. But, you know, knock on wood, so far, nothing tremendously sophisticated.

Q Do you have a theory of why that's -- the stuff's available on the open market -- why that hasn't gotten into Afghanistan?

COL. HOLDAWAY: You know, I mean, I can hypothesize. You know, it simply may be that, you know, it's one thing to buy a weapon. It's more -- it's something else to buy the ammunition for it and be able to sustain it. These guys certainly seem to have the money. You know, they get a fair bit of money, certainly, from, you know, supporting opium smuggling and so -- and a few other sources. But, you know, for some reason we just have not seen the more sophisticated weapons showing up.

Q Okay.

Q Hey, I've got a follow-up question. It's Noah Shactman with Wired.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay.

Q Can you talk a little bit more about what you do to counter this so-called Taliban air defense? Is the answer to wait around until they -- you know, a particular target moves? Is the answer to just be a little less sensitive to civilian casualties? Is the answer to use a different kind of weapon? How do you counter these air defenses?

COL. HOLDAWAY: I would say, you know, when we can, you know -- if we're the ones taking the initiative, then we can afford -- typically we can afford to be patient. And if we lose an opportunity, then, you know, we can be patient, keep working on the problem and, you know, keep working on the target and eventually get another opportunity.

We see that fairly often.

We also will do our best -- you know, based on the target and where it is, we try to pick a weapon that has the best probability of getting -- you know, of getting a kill the first time, because the more weapons you drop, you know, the greater you're increasing the probability of non-combatant casualties, non-combatant deaths, and we certainly don't want that. But if we can use a smaller weapon that has a high probability of accomplishing the objective, then, you know, we would choose to do that.

And, you know, we see weapons like Hellfire, which has a relatively small blast frag radius -- you know, lethal radius; we can use that one. Strafing is a very effective and fairly precise and contained method of attack because you don't have a blast frag radius associated with it.

The issue wasn't in the -- there was a Human Rights Watch report that came out last summer that I thought was pretty -- you know, (it was ?) fair, there were probably some -- yeah, I thought it was a pretty fair report, that talked about troops in contact situation. And that's where it gets difficult.

When we have ground forces that are engaged that are at risk of their lives, then it becomes tremendously important to extricate those guys, save their lives. And unfortunately, in more than one situation since I've been here, you know, we've called in air power on the building from which the weapons fire is coming, and then in the aftermath we find that there were non-combatants in there with the insurgents. And so that's where it gets very difficult.

You know, certainly, letting our soldiers get killed out on the battlefield, that's probably not the answer either. And we certainly are not -- that isn't the answer, and we certainly shouldn't reward the insurgents for

committing what is a war crime, deliberately endangering or indifferently endangering civilians in that manner.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. Thank you, sir.

And unfortunately, we're running short on time today. And I'd like to thank everybody for their questions and comments.

Colonel Holdaway, if you have a any closing comments, you could go on with those right now. COL. HOLDAWAY: Well, thanks for your time. I certainly appreciate your interest. I'll look forward to reading, you know, what you write up, if you got anything of -- you know, I hope you got something of value out of this.

And I'd like to just pass on that, you know, certainly keep in your thoughts the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, Coast Guardsmen, civilians, all the folks out here. I know you do that all the time, and I certainly appreciate that and I know they appreciate that.

So thanks again. And good morning.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. Thank you again, everybody. And today's program will be available online on the Bloggers link at dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as their bios, audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you again, Colonel. It was very insightful today.

And this ends today's call.

END.