

NEWS RELEASE

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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Release No. 04-04-06

Release Date: March 2, 2004

SSG members set up network in potentially “explosive” situation

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SSG Public Affairs

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE - GUNTER ANNEX, Ala. – Proper communication is essential for success of any deployed Air Force unit. When the 455th Expeditionary Operations Group, Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, faced the prospect of losing that capability, they called on the 455 EOG Communications Flight to get the job done.

By the time the four-person team from Headquarters Standard Systems Group, Maxwell AFB, Ala, arrived in the area of responsibility, only four of the 50 original pair copper connections to the precision approach radar site were still serviceable.

This presented a major problem since the lines, exposed to the elements, were the only connection the radar site had to the control tower. Without it, all flightline operations would be grounded; from the weekly mail flight, to the essential close air support missions. Moreover, the lines were unsecured, running across the ground in plain sight of the enemy.

According to Senior Master Sgt. Gerald Muehling, superintendent of the shop, the base had been targeted eight times and actually hit once by enemy fire. “It was our job to install four underground conduits across the airfield,” said Sergeant Muehling. “We knew that it was

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imperative that we work as quickly and safely as possible to get the job done,” he said.

The job, which was called the “The Big Dig Project,” presented quite a challenge for the team since the airfield was only 93 percent cleared of mines when the work began. “The thought of crossing relatively large areas where there might be live munitions was definitely not a calming thought for any of us,” said Sergeant Muehling. “But we had a job to do.”

According to Muehling, they had two communications people who walked in front of a trencher (a large backhoe) to scan the area for undetonated bombs. While Civil Engineer personnel did most of the trenching, the communications team was involved with pretty much everything else. “We were there to do whatever necessary to get the job done, digging manholes, laying concrete, putting in PVC and anything else that would help,” he said.

“It was nothing like I expected but, it wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be,” said Staff Sgt Natasha Brantley, who, along with her husband Staff Sgt. Christopher Brantley, served as the shop systems administrator. While Brantley admits that having her husband there with her made things a little easier she discovered something more about herself during the deployment. “I found that I was braver than I thought, we were there to build the network and each of us was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done,” she said.

“We all knew that there was a real danger but I also felt it was important that I was out there with my people, so that they knew that I was willing to take the same risks I was asking them to,” said Muehling.

Although the team never ran into any live munitions, they did come close. “One a 500-pound undetonated bomb was found only 100 feet from where we were trenching,” said Muehling. “I

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know that we simply could not have accomplished what we did without the team of professionals that made up our shop.” After three months, and many roadblocks the job was completed.

Despite the time and effort required to complete The Big Dig Project,” the team still managed to run the Group communications shop. The shop controlled all communications for the 600 personnel assigned and both airfields. In addition they created 8,000 user accounts for Army and Air Force personnel, condensing a process that once took three weeks to less than 24 hours. They also replaced 250 laptops with desktop computers and much more.

Their efforts were recognized when Gen Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited the base and presented Sergeant Muehling with a coin on the recommendation of the commander and command chief master sergeant. “Everyone on this team is truly deserving of this coin because of their outstanding efforts,” said Muehling.

“It was really an honor to be part of an effort that made had such a critical impact on mission success,” said 1st Lt. Wade Bolinger, who was the flight commander. “Although it was a tough job, we were proud to do it and we all felt it was a true privilege to serve our country over there,” he said.

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