



By Jennifer G. Williams

## The 193rd Special Operations Wing



photos by Joint Combat camera operate on a day-on, day-off basis, Kovach said.

Officials cannot say enough about the 193rd Special Operations Wing of the Pennsylvania National Guard, but they can't say much about the Air National Guard's only Special Operations unit either.

Lt. Edward Shank, public affairs officer for the unit, said he couldn't disclose in what country the 193rd is currently operating, or how many of their personnel or aircraft have been involved in Operation Enduring Freedom in or near Afghanistan.

What Shank can say is that the unit's famous self-contained radio and broadcast station, Commando Solo, has been involved in broadcasting surrender messages to the Taliban in Afghanistan and information to the Afghani people. And every one of the wing's members on the mission volunteered for the rotation.

The highly specialized unit is recognized for its contributions in conflicts dating back to 1970. And Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently praised the 193rd during a press conference discussing the conflict in Afghanistan.

"When Secretary (of Defense Donald H.) Rumsfeld stands up in front of the Press Corps and names our unit specifically," Shank said, "that's pretty special."

Officials with the National Guard Bureau in Arlington, Va., confirm the 193rd is one of the most deployed units in the National Guard, a reputation the unit's commander, Brigadier General Steven Speer, doesn't like to brag about.

"We are called upon pretty heavily," admits Shank. With 12-15 major exercises or real-world deployments each year, the unit's "operations tempo is incredible," he said.

The 193rd has seen combat four times: in Southeast Asia in 1970, Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989 and Southwest Asia (Desert Shield and Desert Storm) in 1990 and 91. More recently, the wing has been involved with operations in Haiti, Kosovo and Bosnia. "If there's a party on the planet, we're invited," Shank said.

The primary mission of the 193rd, based out of a 38-acre base at Harrisburg International Airport in Middletown, Pa., is to provide airborne broadcast capabilities on a moment's notice, anywhere in the world. The 193rd does so using six C-130 cargo planes that have been converted to flying radio and television stations capable of broadcasting a given message on any frequency — AM, FM, HF, TV and military communications — at any time. The EC130E planes were nicknamed "Commando Solo" about 10 years ago after being upgraded to handle color television capabilities. The wing is currently swapping out the EC130E models for more modern EC130Js, which reportedly handle better have greater range, better fuel economy and can fly higher (giving them a wider range of broadcast coverage and more protection from ground fire) than the older models, Shank said.

While the unit's aircraft and technological equipment have evolved over the past 30 years, the unit's mission largely has remained the same. It typically receives its broadcast material from the U.S. Army's 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) out of Fort Bragg, N.C., the only active duty component psychological operations unit in the country. The U.S. State Department reviews and approves messages developed by the psyop group before the material is given to the 193rd for delivery. If a live message is desired, a linguist from the 4th Psyop Group accompanies the 193rd to broadcast the message in the native tongue of the target audience. To ensure the target audience is listening, leaflets or loudspeaker broadcasts indicate what frequency is being used.

The 193rd is currently using only radio transmissions in Afghanistan, said SMSgt. Michael Kovach, who recently returned from a 45-day voluntary rotation overseas.

"There's not a big demand for television in Afghanistan," Kovach explains. Using AM and short-wave radio frequencies are best on this mission because the towns are so far apart and the countryside is sparsely populated. Short-wave frequencies also are best to use with the mountainous terrain in Afghanistan, he said.

Radio transmissions are formulated to garner the largest audience possible, said Kovach, who serves as a mission systems operator on Commando Solo. Programming starts with Afghani cultural-type music — "a good way to get an audience," he said, "since the Taliban had banned local cultural music for nearly a decade." Between songs, Commando Solo broadcasts messages in the local dialect telling listeners information such as where to go to get emergency medical attention and letting them know that the Americans are after the Taliban and the terrorists and do not want to harm innocent civilians, Kovach said.

Members of the unit involved in the current mission overseas live in "Tent City," and usually





On flying days, crew members show up for work about three hours before takeoff to get ready for the flight and to attend daily briefings on security, intelligence and that day's flight. During days off, crewmembers typically relax in their tents, some of which now have homemade porches and benches made from scrap wood, Kovach said.

"Everyone's trying to make it as homey as possible," he said. "Some people even have made wooden doors and floors for their tents, to help keep them a little cleaner."

Military personnel play cards and dominoes and "read a lot of books" off duty, Kovach said. As the only unit in the Air Force's Special Operations Command, the 193rd is allowed "a lot of leeway," Shank said. "We're pretty much allowed to set our own deployment schedule," he said, "we go over a month or two at a time, then swap out with fresh people, meaning less burnout. Plus, it works out well for everyone involved, including employers and families."

Kovach said he met a lot of Active Duty personnel overseas who had been there since last fall, and who weren't sure when they'd be coming home. "I felt sorry for them, not knowing," he said. "We understand there may come a time when we need to activate our entire unit, and we'll be ready to go, but for now, this schedule works well for us."

Less than a third of the nearly 2,000 personnel in the 193rd are full-time, Shank said. The rest are "Weekend Warriors" with regular jobs and lives. The shorter rotation schedule is a blessing, agrees Kovach, who calls the success of the 193rd "a real testimony to the volunteerism in this group."

And employers of those who volunteered should also be commended, officials said. "Most of the employers I've heard about are proud to have their employees involved in the efforts over there," Kovach said.

The 193rd has completed more than 250 missions since September, Kovach said, and the unit has been recognized time and again for its safety record — more than 150,000 accident-free flying hours over the years. The unit has been awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award eight times, and has been selected as the best flying unit within the Air National Guard.

Recruits to the 193rd are taught on-site in Pennsylvania how to use the unit's specialized broadcast equipment, using a mock-up of the aircraft's communications systems for hands-on training. The 193rd is an accredited Air Force training center, said Kovach, an instructor at the center since 1990.

"Really, it's the only place to train our recruits," he said, "we are a specialized unit; we're the only ones doing this."

Commando Solo operations run both day and night, and typically fly one aircraft at a time. One aircraft has a basic C-130 crew of five, plus one officer and three to eight enlisted Electronic Communications (EC) Operators, depending on the mission.

Once airborne, the mission control chief and the electronic communications systems operators occupy their search, medium and high frequency, very high frequency, and ultra-high frequency monitoring positions in the mission compartment. The compartment has cassette and reel-to-reel audio recorders, a video recorder, television monitors, receivers, noise modulators, transmitters and a live microphone.

The mission control chief, together with the theater commander's planning staff, plans the flight path of the aircraft to ensure the best reception signal to and from the target audience. The Commando Solo crew typically will broadcast on an open frequency, but they have the capability of overpowering an existing signal. The search operator monitors radio and television frequencies to find one that is clear of other broadcasts and is within the range of the target. The operators then tune up transmitters inside the aircraft and corresponding antennae on the outside of the aircraft. An electronics operator plays the message tape through a video or audio recorder to other operators who transmit the signal over the airway.

These methods have proven successful in past conflicts. During Desert Shield and Storm, the 193rd broadcast messages to Iraqi troops urging them to surrender, Shank said. These broadcasts, combined with accompanying psyop leaflets and loudspeaker broadcast programs were motivating factors for about 90,000 soldiers who surrendered, he said.

"People fluff what we do off as propaganda — a word we hate," Shank said. "Propaganda insinuates lies and that offends us. We are putting the truth out there, often to people who have only been exposed to what their government wants them to hear."

"Up until September 11th, articles were written about us that questioned the usefulness of what we do in a high-tech military world," Shank said. "Now, people can see our capabilities and understand the niche we fill."

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