

# AMERICAN AIRMEN'S ACCOUNTS OF IRANIAN MISSILE ATTACKS



**JANUARY 2020**

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**Maj. Gen. Alexis G. Grynkewich**  
**Commander**  
**9th Air Expeditionary**  
**Task Force-Levant**



**CMSgt Antonio J. Goldstrom**  
**Command Chief**  
**9th Air Expeditionary**  
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In the early morning hours of Jan. 8, 2020, Iran launched more than a dozen ballistic missiles clearly targeting U.S. military and coalition forces at Erbil and Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. No member of the U.S. military has been killed by an enemy air strike since the Korean War in 1953, and that remains true thanks to the courageous and decisive actions taken by Airmen on the ground to disperse, evacuate, and shelter forces on an unbelievably crunched timeline.

Within a matter of hours, leaders at the squadron level had to decide which Airmen should evacuate, and who should stay in harm's way to ensure mission continuity. How to do this isn't taught at our leadership courses. The decisions made by bold and brave leaders across the region, executed by trained, professional Airmen at every level, saved the day and precluded further escalation.

We assess we could have lost countless Airmen and soldiers in this attack along with hundreds of millions of dollars in hardware. This event marks a lasting memory in many Airmen's lives, and these accounts recall the human aspect of this conflict. When faced with great adversity, our deployed Airmen responded with their lives at risk. They reacted, and after surviving the largest theater ballistic attack in modern warfare, they remain resilient. Here are their stories.



**Lt. Col. Staci Coleman**  
**443 AES Commander**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

On the evening of January 7th, I was informed that Iran planned to attack Al Asad. I stood by my desk trying to wrap my mind around the reality of the situation. I needed to develop a plan to keep all 160 of my personnel safe, and I knew I didn't have long to make a decision. I worked a plan with my director of operations and flight commanders to evacuate half of my team, while the remaining half would stay behind to operate and secure the airfield. My flight commanders were responsible for compiling the lists of personnel, and I explained it needed to be divided by combat capability and then by those they believed were emotionally equipped to endure remaining behind for a possible missile attack. I told my DO that he would go with the evacuation team. We needed to preserve combat capability, and if things went horribly wrong back here, I needed him to return and command the squadron and resume operations. He didn't question me, but I could tell it made him uneasy. I was being forced to gamble with my members' lives by something I couldn't control. I was deciding who would live and who would die. I honestly thought anyone remaining behind would perish. I didn't believe anyone would survive a ballistic missile attack, and it made me feel sick and helpless. In the end, I said a prayer and asked God to guide my actions and protect my troops. I resolved to place the fate of my team in His hands and I refocused my attention on executing the plan.

As I shook hands and hugged the necks of my teammates who were evacuating, I told them not to worry and that I'd see them tomorrow...even though I doubted what I was saying to be true. As they left and the remaining members began stocking bunkers with essential items to last us through the night, I took a few moments to sit alone and contact my family to say one final 'I love you.' Once the last aircraft took off, we closed the runway and settled in the bunker. The first wave of missiles hit, and the ground shook with a force impossible to put into words. The blast waves could be felt throughout the entire body. There was no doubt I made the right decision to evacuate half my team, but I feared those left behind might not live through the night.

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***“I was being forced to gamble with my members’ lives by something I couldn’t control. I was deciding who would live and who would die.”***

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After about the third wave of strikes, I became convinced that we could walk out alive as long as the bunker didn't take a direct hit. But I was extremely concerned for my security forces team outside, as well as my airfield ops flight in a separate bunker. I had no idea if they were okay. We had poor radio signals inside the bunker and no way to reach them. I had to just sit and wait. At last, my security forces team pounded on the bunker door and informed us there were no known casualties. It was a miracle. The other members of my team returned approximately 12 hours after evacuating Al Asad. I don't know what I've done to deserve such dedicated and loyal Airmen, but I know without a doubt the blind trust and genuine love we've developed over the past few months played a major role in our survival that night.



**Maj. Johnathan Jordan**  
**443 AES**  
**Director of Operations**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

The commander came to my office asking me to join her in her office. Tensions had been building in the region for the past few days after the drone strike on Soleimani. As I walked to the commander's office, I was expecting to read a threat report of an attack against Al Asad—a barrage of rockets, harassing fire. Something we have seen before. When I read the threat report, my heart sank as soon as I read "rockets from Iran." I knew that meant missiles. I walked next door to the 1st Expeditionary Rescue Group to discuss their plans and what other intelligence streams they had received. They were seeing the same report and asked if our squadron wanted to evacuate with them to the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing. Several things ran through my mind during those moments. I thought, 'We have to maintain operations, we need to get as many people as possible out of harm's way, and we need to be prepared for total destruction.' I immediately went to the commander and advised her that the rescue group would be able to take some of our squadron. "Ok. You'll lead the team that is evacuating," she said. I can't explain the frenzy of emotions that flowed through my body. Shame for being a little relieved I was leading the team away. Guilt I was leaving some of the squadron behind. Determined. Anxious for what I may return to discover. The commander and I looked directly at each other and executed. We both had a job to do. We briefed the flight commanders and instructed them to make a list of who is staying and who is leaving from their teams. Like a script from a movie, they immediately understood the commander's intent and made it happen. As I read the lists, I

envisioned all the faces of those staying behind. Eighty and eighty. Eighty staying behind to make sure the mission continues. Eighty leaving to make sure the mission continues. We trusted our flight commanders and they trusted us.

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***“Eighty staying behind to continue the mission. Eighty leaving to make sure the mission continues. We trusted our flight commanders and they trusted us.”***

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I led my team out onto the dark flight line and boarded the C-130. I could only imagine the pilot's mind. We were heavy and a steep take-off was needed. We landed at the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing and now the wait began. Like a bee bouncing around, I tried to reassure my troops, crack jokes and talk through their anger of not being with those we left behind. I chose not to tell them we were the “broken glass” plan. I couldn't tell them that I was getting my mind around the fact we might have to identify bodies and lay our friends to rest. I tried to contact someone at Al Asad. Nothing. I felt hopeless and helpless as the news broke of missile attacks on base where the rest of my squadron was. Early the next morning, I received a message that everyone was okay and all accounted for. Chills rushed through my body. We had survived. I rallied my team as we celebrated the good news. We planned out our return to Al Asad. I told them our squadron would be tired, and it was our time to get to work. As we boarded the buses to the plane back to Al Asad, I looked at my troops, eager to get back and relieved their friends were okay. I took one more opportunity to speak. "Anyone notice our squadron patch is a Phoenix? Phoenixes rise from the ashes."



**Capt. Nate Brown**  
**443 AES Civil Engineer**  
**Flight Commander**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

The evening of Jan. 7, 2020, was a complete whirlwind. There was an intensity inside our squadron's building that night that I have never felt before. As I assembled my flight, I took a few deep breaths to calm my voice before I spoke. I had previously determined with my senior enlisted folks that six was the minimum number of personnel required for us to make repairs to the airfield. We called out the names of those staying and those evacuating. I gave each of them a big hug as they walked past me on their way to the aircraft. We told each other, "I'll see you tomorrow," fighting back thoughts of what might happen that night. We all knew there was a possibility of never seeing each other again.

Fast-forward to midnight. My team is out in a bunker with other members of the squadron as we anxiously await for what's in store. We're inside "the attack window" indicated by intel reports. Another hour passes. Maybe we're ok. We're outside the window, right? Maybe I'll try to lay down in the bunker and get some sleep. Before I have time to doze off, I feel it. There's been an attack on the base. I throw on my body armor as more impacts come. No one says a word. The explosions finally stop, and I feel a collective sigh within the bunker. The next wave hits. Then the next, and the next. I have no idea if anyone is alive outside this bunker. Around sunrise, we finally depart the bunker and learn of no casualties being reported. I lived to see the next morning. I smile. I say a small prayer of thanks. The hand of God protected us that night. He protected all of us.



**Capt. Adella Ramos**  
**443 AES Airfield Operations**  
**Flight Commander**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**



The proceeding paragraphs are an attempt to describe the intangible. I can only hope that this will serve to help those who were not there understand the courage, bravery, and strength of the human spirit exemplified that night. That night and days to follow are something that I will always carry with me. I watched as commanders made life or death decisions based on little information and a whole lot of gut. I witnessed simultaneous relief and resentment displayed by the people, who were told they had to leave their teammates behind. On the faces of those who stayed, I saw the power of sheer will to make it to tomorrow, peer through watery eyes after saying their cryptic goodbyes to their teams and loved ones. No one quite understood the magnitude of what we might be facing. But as the night carried on, there was an unspoken understanding that this might be it. We might not live through this.

At 29 years old, I never thought an island girl from Guam would end up a world away in western Iraq, amidst an unprecedented and historical form of combat. I'm still not quite sure if there was a higher reason for my presence here, but if nothing else than to learn from this experience. I learned that you are capable of handling more than you think as I worked to lead my team in a focused, calm, and strong manner...even though on the inside, I was feeling quite the opposite. I learned that in the uncertainty of your mortality to find solace in your faith and at all costs to protect your mental fortitude. The mere seconds following the announcement for "INCOMING" were felt in slow motion. Not knowing if you would be the target was the biggest mental tribulation. I learned there is immense power in brotherhood among my military family. In the face of what I felt was my darkest hour, I was not alone. I knew that that together we could get through anything. And we did.



**MSgt Janet Liliu**  
**443 AES RAPCON**  
**NCOIC**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

I received a text message from one of my controllers that Captain Ramos needed me at the squadron, and it was urgent. She asked me to help choose the controllers I needed to stay behind to keep the airfield open, and the others would evacuate. I wasn't sure of the details, but I knew it was serious. I decided that three of my most experienced supervisors, Master Sgt. Wesley Corbin, Staff Sgt. Mason Recla and Staff Sgt. Evan Weathersby, would stay behind, and the remaining nine controllers would evacuate. In the middle of the chaos, I sent messages to my family telling them I loved them. I saw people calling their loved ones everywhere. I could feel the sadness in the air. People were calling back home, not knowing if it would be the last time they would see or hear from them. My kids were at school when they got my messages, and one-by-one, they called me. I was heartbroken, but I had to focus. Half of my team was staying, and the other half was leaving. Seeing my guys' faces and hugging them before they left is something I'll never forget. I kept thinking, 'This should not be happening.' After they evacuated, I went to make sure my three remaining guys were okay. I remember looking at the radar scope, and the sky was full of aircraft. It was surprisingly so calm. It looked like just another day at work. We stayed until the last aircraft carrying a group of evacuees made it out, and then we closed down the facility. It was eerie hearing, "Attention all aircraft: Al Asad Air Traffic Control is evacuating."

What happened in the bunker...well...no words can describe the atmosphere. As we got settled, some took a seat on the floor and others on the cots. The captain sat by the door and I sat right next to her. Some

of us joked, trying to make light of the situation, but the reason why we were there was weighing heavy on everyone. Around 1 a.m., we heard “Seek Shelter, Seek Shelter, Seek Shelter,” over the loud speakers, then we immediately felt and heard the impact. Dirt particles sprayed through the openings of the bunker. I was gifted a cross earlier that day, so I held it tightly, prayed quietly and thought of my parents, my kids, my family, everyone. I wasn’t ready to die, but I tried to prepare myself with every announcement of an incoming missile. I had to. We all had to.

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***“I wasn’t ready to die, but I tried to prepare myself with every announcement of an incoming missile. I had to. We all had to.”***

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Our Security Forces team constantly came to check on us. It was so nice to see their faces when the bunker doors opened and hearing them on the radio when they were out. There were times after the impacts we’d hear them across the radio, and then very long periods of silence. I would ask the captain if she thought the Defenders were okay, and she reassured me they were. She said they were safe. I knew she didn’t really know, but it calmed me down. Then finally around sunrise, we heard the report of no casualties and the final announcement of “All Clear.” We did a quick clean-up of the bunker, disbursed to conduct a damage assessment of the facility, and we were back at work to continue air traffic control operations. It was a long night and even longer morning, but we were all safe...Thank God. My guys did such an incredible job, and I’m so happy that we made it. There’s an undeniable, indescribable bond that was made that night and early morning we’ll never forget.



**MSgt John Haines**  
**TSgt Bryan Moody**  
**SSgt Drew Davenport**  
**SrA Michael Booth**  
**443 AES Security Forces**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

It was very clear something big was happening. The entire base seemed to be bugging out. We received a quick intel briefing around 8 p.m. from our Security Forces flight commander, who confirmed we were expecting an attack from Iran – possible threats of chemical, biological or ballistic missiles – inbound between the hours of 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. Throughout the night, we drove around in our military all-terrain vehicle (MATV) and visited all the posts and patrols, checking on the teams’ welfare and readiness—watching and waiting for something to happen. Around 1 a.m. we dismounted at an Entry Control Point and heard the first announcement of “INCOMING – INCOMING – INCOMING” over the radio and quickly ran back to our MATV for protection. As we closed the door, there was a large explosion and the first impact of a missile struck only 100 meters away from our position. We could feel the blast and continue to hear missiles hitting other locations on base as they lit up the night sky with every impact. We began to sweep the base looking for casualties, structural damage and impact sites. It seemed the entire base was enveloped in smoke and dust.

More missiles struck the base throughout the night, while we continued to sweep the flight line, ramps and areas where personnel were sheltering in bunkers. At one point, we heard over the radio that we were needed to help evacuate personnel from a perimeter guard tower. A missile had struck so close that it had damaged the tower and flames were blocking the exit. We quickly maneuvered toward the tower through fire and debris created by two impact sites, where we saw two Army personnel attempting to evacuate the tower through a small

opening normally used to hold a .50 caliber machine gun. They were crawling out of the tower onto seven-foot-tall HESCO barriers lined with layers of concertina wire. Master Sgt. Haines realized there wasn't much time to react, so he slammed the MATV into the HESCO barriers to create a bridge for the soldiers to escape the tower and avoid the c-wire. Once the two soldiers made it safely onto the MATV, our team split into two groups. A few of us held the defensive position to maintain perimeter security, while the rest of us quickly checked over the soldiers for any serious injuries and brought them to their company commander at a separate area on base.

After we returned to our patrols, we learned the Army desperately needed a safe landing area as their Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) were circling overhead and running dangerously low on fuel. Our team coordinated with the Base Defense Operations Center and the Army to determine the best location to avoid any impact sites for them to safely recover six RPAs, saving more than \$120 million worth of combat capability. Upon conclusion of the many missile assaults, we conducted battle damage assessments, relayed information to the BDOC of no known casualties on base, and made it to the bunker where our squadron commander and other personnel were taking shelter. We continued to check in on personnel as morning came and finally made it back to our rooms to rest around 7 a.m.





**Anonymous**  
**443 AES Security Forces**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

“Recall now at the squadron with gas mask and real world filters.” That’s the text I got at approximately 8 p.m. on Jan. 7, 2020. When I got to the squadron, I saw worried looks in everyone’s faces despite their attempts to stay calm and collected. My mind began racing thinking about every possible outcome. Our captain briefed us, “We have intel reports that we’re going to be hit with a ballistic missile that could possibly have chemical or biological hazards, or we’re getting hit with 30 rockets. Either way, we are defenders. We are going to do our job and do it well. Standby for postings.” When they called out postings, they said that some people would be staying and some would be flying out to evacuate to a safe location. I was told I was part of the team staying behind. I’m not going to lie. I was happy hearing what I was posted. If things were to pop off, I’d be right there on the front lines and that is what I signed the dotted line to do. As soon as I got to my post, I started mentally preparing myself for how I would lead my team through various scenarios that night. As we drove out to the airfield, we surveyed the area and saw every single aircraft ramping up to leave. I texted my wife to say, “We’re okay right now.” At the same moment I sent the text, the base got the notification “INCOMING, INCOMING, INCOMING.”

We felt the impact of the first missile as we took shelter in the closest bunker. The sky lit up and we felt the shock wave as debris from the explosion pummeled our shelter. My ears wouldn’t stop ringing. The next four hours became a blurred mix of emotions and

chaos. Bomb after bomb shook us for what felt like all night. Once the second wave ended, we started to hear gunshots and rockets blowing up, so we thought there was a ground attack. I loaded the machine gun, an M-249, and posted it up to protect our shelter then I told my fire team to hold position. It turned out that a missile caught one of the tents on fire that had ammunition stored in it, causing rounds to cook off. Then the third wave hit.

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***“We felt the impact of the first missile as we took shelter in the closest bunker. The sky lit up and we felt the shock wave as debris from the explosion pummeled our shelter.”***

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My muscles tightened and I could feel my teeth grinding. Then the radio chimed in, “You have six more missiles inbound to your area, followed shortly by two more.” I looked at my team and tightly gripped my M-4 rifle. All I could think of were my daughters. They love for me to sing “You are my sunshine,” so I just started singing quietly to myself and waited for that final moment. I had fully accepted that I would die in that shelter with my team. Around sunrise we got on top of the MATV and looked at the fire behind us and laughed in disbelief that we were still alive. I was finally able to tell my wife I was alive. I have never been so happy to see the sunrise.



**SMSgt Noal Yarnes**  
**443 AES Munitions Accountable**  
**Systems Officer**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

Around 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 7, 2020, I was summoned to the Flight Commander's office for a briefing. It was very late in the evening, which made me both curious and concerned. Who calls a meeting at that time of night? This had to be serious. What I learned in that briefing was even more concerning than I anticipated. Intelligence showed that Iran's ballistic missiles were aimed at Al Asad, and indications were that the Iranian military intended to fire them at us! On the drive back to the living quarters, I pushed aside the visceral feeling of dread and replaced it with what I can only describe as calm determination. Twenty-five years of deployments, exercises, and CBRN training ran through my head creating a mental checklist that asked: Chemical Weapons? Unknown--Bring all gear. Nuclear warheads? Unknown--Seek shelter with substantial concrete walls. Could there be a simultaneous ground attack? Unknown--Bring all issued weapons, wear all Kevlar, and bring extra ammunition for immediate resupply and hope the Munitions Storage Area isn't destroyed. When I reached the living quarters with my mental checklist prepared, I proceeded to brief my Airmen. I will never forget how they reacted to the news. No questions. No external display of fear. On the contrary, they wanted to stay and fight! They threw on their uniforms, grabbed their weapons, and were in the truck within 10 minutes. We made our way to the munitions area to collect our remaining gear and ammunition we would need to survive the night and some caffeinated beverages to keep us "frosty." Within an hour, all preparations had been made, so we proceeded to the squadron for a briefing.



The briefing was very short and concise, and the expectations were exceedingly clear: the danger was real, those who were staying had an hour to seek shelter as the rest of the squadron was being airlifted to safety. It was decided that my team and I were staying, so we picked ourselves up and proceeded to the bunker. Once there, we took one last inventory of the rapid resupply ammunition we'd packed, buddy-checked each other's equipment, fixed our real-world chemical filters to our M-50 masks, and went to work carrying in bundles of water and setting cots up for folks to rest on – anything to keep busy and pass the time. The waiting was the hardest part. Some people were playing cards or just talking quietly. Some were sleeping or at least pretending to be. Everyone was brave. Then came the first impact. The bass resonating through the floor and walls of the bunker was met by muffled vocalizations I can't quite quantify as screams. The sound was more guttural, as if pushed from inside the human body by an involuntary spasm of clenched muscles. Then the second impact. Then the third. Time passed inconsistently between the explosions, which heightened the tension – mere seconds between some, and what seemed like hours between others. Occasionally the blast wave would kick open the outer and inner bunker doors. Dirt riding the blast wave would pollute the air making it hard to see and breathe. Occasionally we'd receive news of rescue attempts or fires lighting up the sky, but damage and injury reports were difficult to come by. Cellular and radio communication was less than reliable because of the thickness of the concrete protecting us. Finally, there was a period of silence long enough that I managed to get some sleep. "All Clear!" rang out. The bunker's occupants silently collected their belongings and headed for the door. What devastation awaited us beyond those doors, nobody knew. With a collective sigh of relief and a little more profound appreciation for life, we stepped out into the unknown to assess the damage and begin the rebuilding process.



**Lt. Col. Michael Welch**  
**321 AEW Chief of Staff**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

On Jan. 7, 2020, the night of the Iranian theater ballistic missile attacks on Al Asad Air Base, a captain from my unit and I just happened to be displaced from our typical offices near Baghdad due to the Iranian-backed protestors attacking the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The captain and I first sensed something was different when we saw the civilian workers putting on their body armor, and they told us the coffee shop was closing immediately. We went to the squadron building, where we were brought into the fold by Lt. Col. Coleman's team. As an intelligence officer by trade, I tried plugging into all the intelligence channels I could. Information seemed scarce, which made me nervous. After processing the seriousness of the situation and knowing my captain, a Security Forces Officer, had defenders from her home unit deployed to Al Asad, I pulled her aside and gave her the option to be a part of the group evacuating or stay and assist with airfield defense. I remember keeping my eyes locked on hers, trying to gauge any non-verbal cues from her response. She was poised, calm and determined, and she decided to stay behind with her guys. I looked around to see if I could be of any benefit, but there was nothing. I hated leaving, but I knew I could be used to lead the team evacuating for a potential return to secure and rebuild the base. I wrestled with my own guilt. Looking back, this was certainly my biggest challenge as a leader to accept my fate as someone who evacuated, while others stayed behind.

I was on the last aircraft to leave Al Asad that night, and we all arrived safely at the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing. I texted my captain to check in. She said all was quiet. A few seconds later, she texted "Sir, it ain't quiet anymore!" The first volley had impacted. I was pulled into the intel cell at the wing, but I began feeling nauseous as we watched each volley's impact at Al Asad through the ISR feed. I reset my focus and made use of my expertise in this chaotic situation as I pushed data to the aircrew planning to get us back to Al Asad.

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***"I wrestled with my own guilt. Looking back, this was certainly my biggest challenge as a leader to accept my fate as someone who evacuated, while others stayed behind."***

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We needed to get folks back to get the airfield up and running again. When the strikes finally ceased, I got a text from my captain stating she was alive and there were no casualties reported. I couldn't believe it. I was finally able to breathe, and I shared the good news with the squadron. In less than 18 hours, we were back on the ground at Al Asad and saw the faces of our teammates who had stayed behind. I watched as Airmen reunited, in awe at the humble professionalism of those who stayed back to keep the base secure and the airfield running. Here I was – just a displaced staff member in the wrong place at the wrong time – but I was embraced and valued as a part of the team.



**SSgt Brian Sermons  
22nd Expeditionary  
Weather Squadron  
Aviation Weather NCOIC  
Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

This is certainly one of the hardest things I'll ever have to write because it's the scariest thing that I've ever had to endure. On January 7th, we got an announcement of "PPE ALWAYS," so we knew it was time to prepare for some type of attack. We gathered our things and headed to the airfield. There were so many aircraft lined up and running. You could feel a weird intensity in the air as we learned that we needed to scramble all aircraft. There were conversations about having to leave some people behind, which nobody wanted, but understood it needed to be done. Those of us staying were going to hunker down at the airfield since it was near a living area surrounded by stacked-up HESCO barriers to act as our defensive location against a potential ground attack. I paired up with one of the radio operators I've worked with for the last few weeks. We said a little prayer together, and we're told that we need to grab our gas masks since there is a high chance that we'll get indirect fire and possible CBRNE agents.

We wait for an attack while watching aircraft after aircraft leave with hundreds of people. We're instructed around 11:30 p.m. to head to the bunkers, since the attack would potentially happen between midnight and 2 a.m. The radio operator and I talk about life, how we met our wives, and why we joined the military. Then the announcement "Seek Shelter! Seek Shelter! Seek Shelter!" Our captain yells to get down and shouts, "TBM

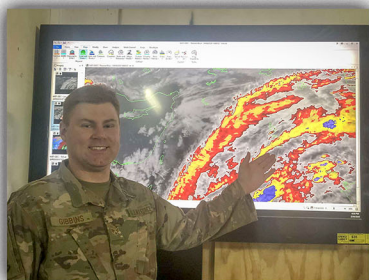
inbound from Iran!” Then I felt the most soul-shaking explosion. Three more missiles hit – one within 150 meters of our bunkers. We could hear a shower of debris raining over the bunkers, smoke and dust filling the air inside. Aside from our shaky breathing, an eerie silence followed, then we heard rounds of ammo cooking off. We heard fires roaring and smoke alarms in the distance. The loud voice went off again, followed by the awful sound of repeated explosions. I kept thinking, ‘The next one is coming for us. I won’t be able to see my wife and kids again. My parents and my brother.

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***“I kept thinking, ‘The next one is coming for us. I won’t be able to see my wife and kids again. My parents and my brother. They’re going to be left on this earth without me. I just want to hug them one more time.’”***

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They’re going to be left on this earth without me. I just want to hug them one more time.’ I was shaking from the cold, the fear and the extreme amounts of adrenaline. We were exhausted and afraid. More explosions, then silence. We finally hear the “All Clear,” but there’s no stopping. The mission must carry on and I switched to auto-pilot. I eventually stopped shaking after a day or so. I’m grateful to be alive and even more thankful to God that no one had been killed. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. We will continue to pick up the pieces because the mission has to continue, but I will never forget that night for the rest of my life.



**SrA Warren Gibbins  
22nd Expeditionary  
Weather Squadron  
Staff Weather Officer  
Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

I came to work like any other night, and we started hearing that Iran was planning something. We told everyone to be in bunker starting at 11 p.m. until morning based on the expected time of their attack. I remained in the tactical operations center as we monitored Camp Taji and other locations across Iraq. Eventually, we were notified via classified channels, “TBM launch from Iran to AAAB.” I announce it to the TOC as its getting posted to several other channels, then the officer-in-charge tells me to get to a bunker. I put on my helmet and met the First Sergeant at the door. I step out and hear the impacts. Two loud explosions. The third hits about 50 yards away destroying a living area, and I’m pelted with small rubble. We bash in the TOC door and crawl inside as quickly as possible. We check to see if the OIC and other personnel in the TOC are okay. It’s full of floating dust and insulation, and it’s hard to see anything. There were a couple more impacts, then we felt a break in explosions and took advantage of the lull to move to the nearest concrete bunker.

Once we got to the bunker, I thought it might be over. But within a couple minutes, there were more missiles. People were diving through the small gaps of the bunker entrance and piling in. There were people sitting along the edges with their knees to their chest and many more standing. After a few hours passed

and the missiles stopped, we heard the Giant Voice announce, “STAN TWO.” Someone said this meant we needed to ‘lock and load’ and prepare to defend. This was the biggest shock and fear-inducing moment. Many people had left their weapons behind in the panic, and some didn’t have ammo.

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***“It’s full of floating dust and insulation, and it’s hard to see anything. There were a couple more impacts, then we felt a break in explosions and took advantage of the lull to move to the nearest concrete bunker.”***

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People began to set up at the corners and pull security. Then we waited. Security Forces came by a couple of times, but thankfully nothing ever happened. When they finally called “All Clear,” we just continued to wait. It wasn’t until the second “All Clear” that we began moving to another set of bunkers to more adequately house everyone. I finally met up with my team later and spoke in disbelief at what we had experienced. The whole thing was pretty wild, but we survived to live another day.



**Capt. Wesley Florez**  
**1st Expeditionary Rescue Group**  
**Executive Officer**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

On the morning of January 7th, I came in to my office like any other day. President Trump had successfully carried out the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani just a few days prior. Since then, I had a feeling of dread. I had seen what many had referred to as a tit-for-tat series of actions that started with Iranian aggression against our forces in Iraq. We received a report early afternoon that Iran was preparing to launch theater ballistic missiles at our base. It didn't make logical sense in my mind, at least. Why would they risk open conflict with a military that could undoubtedly wipe them out?

This new information was compelling enough that our group made the decision to leave Al Asad Air Base with as many people as possible. I was still skeptical about the threat, but eventually made my way to an awaiting aircraft. Looking back, I'm not entirely sure I was aware of how dangerous my situation was at the time. I wasn't scared. I didn't feel particularly threatened. However, after we landed at our parent wing's location, I was briefed on a situation I thought implausible: Iran had attacked our base with theater ballistic missiles. I felt as though I had been punched in the gut. I was safe, but the ramifications of what would come next filled me with questions I couldn't answer. How many people were hurt or killed? What was our response going to be? How bad was the damage to our base? Would we even be able to return? What waited for us if we did return? What was our next step?



The most important question for me, aside from our casualties, was how we would respond. I took time to call my wife. I had wanted to shield her from the reality of the danger in Iraq, but at this point I knew the message would get out and likely be broadcasted to every possible outlet.

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***“I was safe, but the ramifications of what would come next filled me with questions I couldn’t answer. How many people were hurt or killed? What was our response going to be? How bad was the damage to our base? Would we even be able to return? What waited for us if we did return? What was our next step?”***

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When she picked up I told her, “You’re probably going to hear something on the news soon. Don’t worry about it. I’m fine. I’m safe.” She brushed it off and didn’t seem to think much of it. Sometime after the news broke, she called me back frantically asking if I was, in fact, okay. I reassured her everything was fine and she had nothing to worry about. We stayed at our parent wing for another week, while parts of our group returned to Al Asad to begin reconstitution and clean up. The stress surrounding the situation caused me to lose a significant amount of weight, but overall I was glad I was still alive and would live to see my wife and children again one day.



**SSgt Christian Evans**  
**1st Expeditionary Rescue Group**  
**Radio Systems Specialist**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

On the night of Jan. 7, 2020, around 7 p.m., Chief came into our office, closed the door and told us that there was a high probability of an attack. We started to move out to the HC-130s. I played out the possibility of being attacked on the runway in mind, and I thought, ‘Man, I really hope we leave here soon.’ Once we hit a steady altitude, I felt relieved. Landing at our wing headquarters location provided me with a great feeling of safety that I had been lacking in Al Asad ever since Soleimani was killed. I hoped our friends at the 443rd Air Expeditionary Squadron were going to be alright. After a few hours, our 443rd pals walked in! My cousin called me just to talk, so I pretended like it was another normal day at work, not mentioning the ongoing situation.

Eventually, we huddled up with the commander and were told to sit tight. We were informed that the theater ballistic missile strike had occurred and was ongoing. We were told not to let out many details, especially our current location. Thankfully, we were given permission to tell our families we were safe because our leadership said the news would be reporting on these strikes soon enough. Turns out the news report played on the TV right after our huddle, and everyone rushed over to watch. We all sat there in silence, and I hoped that everyone back at the base was safe. After a few minutes, I spoke with my girlfriend, parents and sisters to let them know I was fine. It felt so surreal. We didn't know what to think or how to react. I honestly thought war with Iran was inevitable. We finally boarded the flight back to Al Asad and were briefed about some of the destruction before seeing it. It was shocking to see what the missiles had done to the compound. I got to my tent, made my bed and finally showered. I felt like I had never been that clean in my life. I also felt like I had never been that hungry in my life, so I went and got some food from the dining facility before passing out in my bed.

**SSgt Daniel Watford**  
**26th Expeditionary**  
**Rescue Squadron**  
**HC-130J FARP Specialist**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**



Prior to the first indication of a possible attack, I was pulling alert duties with the rest of the 211th crew inside our building. Sometime in the middle of the night, we received the first indications, but it seemed that nothing was 100 percent confirmed. As soon as we got a confirmation that we were in true danger, everyone seemed to scramble. I went back to our sleeping area and woke up my Forward Area Refueling Point team member and told him to pack a 72-hour bag with uniforms and gear. Everyone headed over to the rescue camp, and we started to pack all mission-essential equipment. A handful of people and I started evacuating personnel to our HC-130s. We knew we needed to help get people out of danger, as well as preserve our rescue equipment and our mission capabilities in the region.

In the days leading up to this event, we had practiced this type of movement, so this time seemed like just another exercise. A lot of people in the plane were ready for the event to end like any other exercise, but we actually flew off to our wing headquarters location. The situation became more and more real as we met with our commander, who informed us that our base had been attacked. Shortly after, the news channels started breaking with information and videos from Iran, where the ballistic missiles had launched. There was a flood of emotion for me knowing that we actually got attacked by something with devastating power and kinetic energy. I felt angry and worried that American lives may have been lost in the attack. Overall, this was an eye-opening experience that made everyone realize we are in a combat environment and that readiness and preparation for events can ultimately save lives.



**SrA Kade Cowen**  
**26th Expeditionary**  
**Rescue Squadron**  
**HC-130J FARP Specialist**  
**Al Asad Air Base, Iraq**

On the night of January 7th, I was awakened by an Airman in my unit, who said I needed to pack a 72-hour bag. I was a little bit confused on what was happening, but I proceeded to pack a bag and get over to my unit's building for more information. When I arrived, our commander told us to load everyone on the HC-130s to get out of danger. I didn't know what danger he was talking about, but I did the things asked of me with four other Airmen and got people to the aircraft so we could leave. I was informed when we were driving out to the plane that we were going to be attacked by ballistic missiles. I was in a bit of disbelief, but not too concerned. The driver sounded really scared, so I didn't want to frighten her any more. I reassured her everything was going to be okay, and we loaded the rest of our people on the aircraft.

When we arrived at our wing headquarters location, we all gathered around the television and watched the breaking news about our home base getting hit. Then we had an all-call with our commander who told us our camp was possibly hit pretty badly. The whole experience felt like a bad dream. We came back the next day, and it was completely eye-opening to look at the damage and what was hit. I was overcome with a feeling of extreme luck and gratitude that we had evacuated. If we had not left when we did, I believe people would have probably been killed, and that is so scary.

**MSgt Anthony Chacin**  
**442 AES**  
**Superintendent**  
**Erbil Air Base, Iraq**



At approximately 5 p.m. on Jan. 7, 2020, the first Iraqi C-130J arrived at Erbil Air Base with over 100 passengers, and two more birds followed that evening with 170 additional passengers--all evacuating from Balad Air Base. By this point, I was fully aware something was going on that night, and I made sure to reach out to every person staying in “Air Force Village” to ensure they were aware of indirect fire procedures in the event of an attack.

At approximately 11 p.m., the “GROUND ATTACK” alarm sounded across base. I directed all of my personnel out of their rooms and into their defensive fighting positions. My team had previously been tasked with defending the passenger terminal and the Class I yard that includes all essential food and water supplies for the base, as well as the installation Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit, if attacked. They maintained their positions, while I checked on my Airmen to ensure they were ready for a ground assault. We didn’t know it at the time, but the “GROUND ATTACK” alarm was supposed to be for another location and was clarified about 20 minutes later. Around 2 a.m., the initial sound of an impact was followed quickly by “INCOMING” alarms. The Base Defense Operations Command confirmed rockets were impacting the base. This was not a drill. For the next four hours, most of my Airmen maintained their positions, but I moved a few others to the flight line to ensure the airfield’s ability to continue downloading personnel and cargo and successfully land, park, and fuel ongoing operations. We may be under attack, but we still had a responsibility to maintain operations on the airfield. I couldn’t be prouder of my team that night and their ability to work under extreme stress.



**SrA Dalvin Burns**  
**442 AES**  
**Ramp Ops Specialist**  
**Erbil Air Base, Iraq**

On January 7, 2020, I was on shift when three Iraqi C-130s landed with more than 270 evacuees from Balad Air Base, so I knew something was different that night. Everyone had been on edge for days based on the recent events and threat posture increases. Shortly after leaving work, I heard alarms of an attack while taking a shower. I ran out of the shower as quickly as I could, threw on some clothes and my body armor, grabbed my weapons and rushed back to the passenger

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***“Everyone had been on edge for days based on the recent events and threat posture increases.”***

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Three other Airmen and I were responsible for defending the passenger terminal and the unarmed contractors who worked there. I maintained my position until the “ALL CLEAR” alert was sounded. Later that night, the “INCOMING” alarms sounded. Over the next several hours into the early morning of January 8th, I made myself useful by acting as a liaison – a physical runner – providing critical updates between my officer-in-charge and Air Terminal Operations Center. In between runs, I held down a defensive fighting position for the Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit on base. I finally went to bed at sunrise when the final “ALL CLEAR” announcement rang...and was back on duty for shift the following morning.

**TSgt Brennecc Barnett,  
SSgt Brandon Fritz  
442 AES ATOC Information  
Controllers  
Camp Taji, Iraq**



At approximately 11 p.m. on Jan. 7, 2020, Camp Taji’s Air Terminal Operations Center received a 15-minute “out-call” from an inbound C-17. The aircrew was requesting current threats and status of the airfield. Tech. Sgt. Brennecc Barnett and Staff Sgt. Brandon Fritz immediately contacted the intelligence shop at the 34th Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigade and confirmed there were no imminent threats to Taji and the airfield was clear. Within ten minutes, the C-17 safely landed with a mission to pick-up 103 passengers and 8,000 pounds of baggage and evacuate the area.

Around the same time, the operations section for Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve called and directed the ATOC to have the C-17 immediately depart without passengers based on current threats. Barnett and Fritz remained calm and coordinated with the aircrew, operations and intelligence cells to quickly determine the appropriate course of action. Unbeknownst to them, Barnett and Fritz were performing critical command and control with aircrew and CJTF-OIR, ultimately informing the aircrew to accept the passengers, despite imminent threats of theater ballistic missile strikes. The bird was wheels-up within 30 minutes with all passengers and baggage on board. Only six minutes after they safely evacuated, the “INCOMING” alarms sounded at Camp Taji.



**TSgt Karla Maldonado and SSgt Shane Rehbein  
442 AES Air Traffic Controllers  
Camp Manion, Al Taqaddum, Iraq**

On the evening of Jan. 7, 2020, Camp Manion's Airboss informed the Landing Zone Safety Officers that a large number of helicopters were evacuating from nearby bases due to imminent threats and would need to land at their helicopter landing zones. This particular base's HLZs typically housed less than five helicopters at any given time. Given the news of incoming aircraft, Tech. Sgt. Karla Maldonado and Staff Sgt. Shane Rehbein pulled a plan together to expeditiously land 20 helicopters inside the wire, maneuvering helicopters like jigsaw pieces, and directed eight others to land just outside the base perimeter when space was full.

After landing the last helicopter just before midnight, Rehbein left the air traffic control platform and drove to an HLZ to retrieve lights that were set up to guide aircraft during landing. At that moment, the first "INCOMING" alarms sounded, and Maldonado and Rehbein waited for the inevitable explosion nearby – but they heard nothing. They took the silence as an opportunity to move, so Rehbein rushed to his vehicle, picked up Maldonado back at the tower and drove to the nearest concrete bunker to take shelter. At approximately 4 a.m., they made contact with the Airboss and learned that the helicopters parked outside the base perimeter were



planning to depart immediately. Despite the ongoing “SHELTER INPLACE” alarms, Maldonado and Rehbein left their bunker and moved to the appropriate landing zone to set up lights and prepare the area for departures. Another three hours passed before they heard the “ALL CLEAR” over the loud speakers. Maldonado and Rehbein ultimately prepared both landing zones for departures for the eight helicopters outside the wire and continued working until late the following night to successfully move all remaining helicopters back to their home unit.





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