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A-10 Recovery Continues

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Date: Tue, 12 Aug 1997 20:57:40 -0800

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Date: Tue, 12 Aug 1997 13:12:43 -0400 (EDT)
Subject: Intercepts Net News: Recovery Continues

EOD work challenging on Gold Dust Peak
by Capt. Robyn Chumley
A-10 Recovery Operations Media Center

EAGLE, Colo. (AFNS) -- Staff Sgt. Lee Shulz has worked his fair share of crash sites, but nothing like this.

The explosive ordnance disposal technician knew the A-10 slammed into Gold Dust Peak, but like everybody else, thought he could put his experience to work and safe the site in no time. Just like the F-16 crash site he recently worked. Left wing went left. Left wing's debris went left. Follow the trail. Piece of cake.

No trail this time.

"I've never worked a crash scene that compares to this -- you can't even use your experience," Shulz said. "I've just never seen anything hit something like that."

After April's 400-mph impact, gravity took over and the A-10's million pieces slid everywhere -- via avalanches and rockslides and snowmelt. A million-piece jigsaw puzzle, said Senior Airman Dan Mendoza, also an EOD tech assigned to Moody Air Force Base, Ga.

The two spent their first few days acclimating to the altitude and training with the pararescue specialists on how to use the rope system set up on the lower debris field's 50- to 60-degree slopes.

When Day One of the operation arrived, the excited A-10 recovery crews took a 15-minute UH-1H ride into Gold Dust Peak's basin. The pilots safely dropped everyone off in a marshy, flat area, leaving the crews facing a two-hour hike pulling equipment on sleds up the mountain's rugged terrain.

After that exhausting experience, the Colorado Army National Guard pilots began ferrying people up to the lower debris field, using a jagged rock pad as a landing zone.

Look out over the basin, and it's a beautiful site. Turn and face the mountain, and the challenges begin to add up.

First of all, there's not enough air at 11,500-plus feet. For someone from Georgia, anyway. Second, there's the terrain -- snowy, icy, rocky mountain terrain.

"Every piece of the mountain is an obstacle course," California-native Mendoza said. "You're on a 60-degree angle of a slope and you're constantly looking for parts, but at the same time, you're looking out for number one.

"You can't always take the easiest route because you may not wind up where you need to be working."

Watch people methodically work debris areas on Gold Dust Peak and you know what he means: one minute they're walking along, the next they've sunk up to their thighs in an air-pocket.

Get beyond the sheer challenge of walking on a mountain, then add in the job description: find the munitions, find the chaff and flares, find the bombs.

With MK-26 and Schondsted ferrous ordnance locators in hand, Shulz and Mendoza methodically worked a grid-by-grid search of the sloping lower debris field the first couple of weeks, along with other EOD techs. A lot of ruptured 30 mm rounds, plenty of chaff and flares keep them busy. But no bombs.

Which leads to the inevitable question: Why can't you find the MK-82s?

"The two biggest reasons? The terrain and the snow depth," Shulz answered. "And our capabilities. We're looking maybe 20 feet down (with the metal detectors), and the bombs could be even deeper."

And no one's quite sure what the bombs will look like at this point. The 14-ton A-10 was reduced to rubble -- its Gatling gun twisted like a pretzel, its engines ripped apart. MK-82s have been known to bounce on bombing ranges, but no telling what happened here, say EOD officials.

"If it's ferrous ordnance, you can usually see a hole in the ground," said Tech. Sgt. Jeff Thomas, who's leading the EOD portion of the operation.

Despite the challenges, the munitions expert from Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., said the operation has gone "surprisingly smooth."

"We've had a couple of bumps, but then again, this is a very unique Air Force situation.

"It's been a good training experience -- a chance to practice using our subsurface equipment and work in a different environment."

For Shulz, who along with Mendoza is rotating back to his home station, it's been rewarding, but frustrating.

"It's like leaving a job unfinished," he said on the eve of his departure. "We'd like to have found at least a piece of the bombs before going -- then we can go home satisfied."

That's a feeling the new EOD troops hope to experience.

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