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Presenter: Commander, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Steven Kwast April 20, 2010

DOD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Kwast from Afghanistan

(Note: General Steven Kwast appears via videoconference from Afghanistan.)

MODERATOR: Well, good morning. And it's a privilege to have the opportunity to hear from Brigadier General Steven Kwast, who is the commander of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, which is located at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan.

He's been the wing commander since April of 2009 and can provide an overview of area operations in Afghanistan. He is prepared to speak to the relationship between the pilots in the air and the troops on the ground, with the goal of ultimately providing security and stability to the Afghan people.

He is in Bagram today. And this is our first opportunity to have him in this format, so I'd like to welcome him.

And General, I'll turn it over to you for a few opening comments and then we'll take some questions here. So from the Pentagon, welcome again.

GEN. KWAST: Well, thank you very much for that kind introduction. And forgive the three-second delay as we communicate one to another.

But I'm very grateful that you're taking the time to be interested in and talk about Afghanistan, because it is such an incredibly important, strategic place in the world right now, for a whole series of reasons. And I am grateful to get to talk a little bit today about that and to answer your questions.

So without further ado, let's get right to business.

MODERATOR: Very good.

Well, Barbara's been waving her hand back in the third row, so we'll let her take the first one today.

Q General Kwast, Barbara Starr from CNN. I noticed that aeromedical evac is under your command. So can you explain to us in as much detail as possible why now the Air Force is medevacating wounded, ill or injured patients out of Afghanistan to Balad in Iraq before taking them on to the United States. What is the thinking there? And can you give us any numbers that you can about the numbers of troops going from one war zone to the other before they come home now?

GEN. KWAST: Yes, well, I appreciate that question. And Barbara Starr, I have to say hello to you from General Scaparrotti and the entire team here. You're -- there -- they -- you're one of their biggest heroes out there, and we really appreciate what you do in communicating the story out here to the American people and to the world.

With regard to your question, that is actually an event that was driven by the volcano and the ash that is settling over Europe and England, Ireland and some of the northern-tier European countries. Normally, we take them to Landstuhl. And it really is designed around the medical reality that survival and taking the best care of our soldiers possible needs to have an intermediate stop where they are properly stabilized and given care that may not be able to efficiently be given out here.

So because we could not fly them into Landstuhl because of the safety concerns of the volcanic ash in the air, we used Balad as a stop before they go home. And we took capability and capacity there to do the same thing we do at Landstuhl at Balad. But it's all driven by the requirement medically that that intermediate stop saves lives, and it needs to be done. So I hope that answers your question, but I'm happy to go in more detail if you'd like.

Q Well, I would appreciate it if we could go into more detail. This may not be directly up your ally, but can you possibly explain why Bagram doesn't have -- does Bagram not have the sufficient medical care at the hospital there to stabilize these patients? And you say that it is driven by the need -- the medical reality to ensure survival.

I mean, it raises the question -- you know, it was our understanding troops were being taken directly back to the United States. At some point, did -- was there some belief in Afghanistan in the command structure that wounded troops were at risk and they had to make a stop, that they couldn't bring them, in fact, back directly to the United States? And can you tell us how many wounded troops so far have been medevac'ed to Iraq?

GEN. KWAST: Right. Well, I appreciate that further question, and I'm happy to talk to that. You're right, it's not directly in my lane, but I will tell you that the -- it is not about the amount of care, it's about the capacity and it's about making sure that we triage, if you will: that we make sure that we have capacity for the unexpected events of a battlespace like this.

We have to be prepared at a moment's notice for something like a COP Keating or a devastating attack by the enemy. To have that capacity ready at our hands means we have to move those wounded soldiers and we have to move them in a way that allows us that capacity to be prepared for the unexpected.

Now, the reality is that there is no degradation in care because we're going to Balad instead of Landstuhl. The reality, though, is this very delicate balance of medical care. And the delicate balance of capacity so that we are prepared for the unexpected in the battlespace, where the enemy gets a vote, drives us to this construct that was very wisely crafted, a very creative way of giving maximum care while maintaining maximum capacity.

And what I'll do is, to describe that very nuanced and medically founded construct, we'll get a medical professional to give you all those detailed answers.

But it's all predicated on medical fact and capacity so that at the battlespace, right here where the rubber meets the road, we are prepared for the unexpected.

And no matter what happens to us, no matter what the enemy might do, we are ready to save lives. And we are not so full with people that we cannot handle a major attack.

Q Thank you.

MODERATOR: Go ahead.

Q General, I'm Rick Whittle. I'm here for Rotor & Wing magazine.

I was just wondering. This may be out of your lane. But I was just wondering, do you have any information about how the survivors were evacuated or taken to medical care on April 9th, when the CV-22 Osprey crashed in Zabul province?

And for that matter, do you have any information that you can give us, about what caused that crash, or anything about it?

GEN. KWAIST: Right, well, I appreciate that question, because I appreciate what's behind the question. And that is a very deep concern for those that were wounded and killed and for the safety issues surrounding that.

I will tell you, the one thing you can rest assured at is that the Department of Defense is world class, at any event that takes place, that they preserve evidence and they research root cause, so that we protect people in the future.

And that investigation and that entire process of protecting evidence and driving to root cause and then bringing forward recommendations in every aspect, to make sure something like this never happens again, that is ongoing and will be brought to conclusion, so that all the decisionmakers in our country are able to ensure safe and effective warfighting capability.

Back to your first question, with regard to how were the people taken care of after that devastating accident took place. The answer is, just like any casualty in this battlespace, that they were brought forward to the forward medical facilities. It was based on what happened to them. Every situation is different, and every situation is judged by a medical professional who is qualified to make the decision on exactly how this patient should be treated to make sure they survive and they have long-term care that they need.

And that same construct that applies to any soldier on the battlefield, any airman, any Marine, any civilian, took place with this terrible accident as well.

Does that answer your question sufficiently, sir?

Q I'd like to ask for two clarifications, actually. On the -- on the investigation, I think I could read into your answer that you are denying reports that the aircraft wreckage was destroyed. Is that correct? Yes or no?

GEN. KWAIST: That -- yeah, that is a total misrepresentation of my intention there. I am neither making a statement in one way or the other with regard to the facts in the case. I am talking about the fact that the process is very good at determining root cause and that that will come out eventually.

But it is also important to not comment on things, just like any investigation, because it can sometimes threaten an outcome that is all driven towards safety and protecting future soldiers and fighters that are out here.

So my comment is based on the process and that the process is vigorous, it is aggressive at getting at the root cause, and as quickly as possible, making sure that future lives are protected because we know what happened, to the best of our ability.

So that process is ongoing, and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on anything more specific than that. So you cannot read into my comment one way or the other, and for a very, very important reason: the safety of future soldiers.

Q I was just -- well, what I was -- what I meant to say is that you said all the evidence has been preserved. And there has been a report that the wreckage was destroyed. Those are not necessarily contradictory statements, but I wanted to see if you could tell us whether it's true the wreckage was destroyed.

GEN. KWAST: Yes, they are not contradictory statements, because what we do is we take a look at what took place, we go forward and we gather those things we need and then, depending on the battlespace and the threat and the risk, there's a judgment call made. Once we have what we need to determine root cause, we will say, well, does -- do we -- how many lives are we going to risk to bring this metal back home? Is it better to just destroy it there so it cannot be used against us, or is it better to bring it home?

Those decisions are made very carefully, and it's made by the people who are doing the investigation. But rest assured, that investigative team, they went out there and they got what they needed in order to do this investigation properly. And then, whatever was not needed was destroyed, because the decision must have been made -- and I'm not intimately familiar with any of the details in the case, but my assumption would be that the decision was made that the risk of bringing back things that were not useful to the investigation outweighed the situation, so it was destroyed in place after they had gathered all of the important pieces of information.

Q That's very helpful.

Q General, Bill McMichael, Military Times.

Just a quick follow on Barbara's question. The -- we were told last week that these flights, the air medical flights, were coming straight from the theater to Andrews, and patients were being transferred from there to Walter Reed or to Bethesda.

When was the change made to stop them intermediately at Balad? Or were we misinformed last week when we were told they were coming straight back to Andrews?

GEN. KWAST: Right. And forgive me, the question was a bit distorted just because of the technology and the delay. Could you repeat the question again, please, sir? My -- and forgive me for not being able to hear the beginning of it.

Q Last week we were told that air medical flights were coming straight from the theater, because of volcanic ash plume, to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington. Now we're being told that there's an intermediate stop being made at Balad. Were we misinformed before, or was this change made subsequent to the initial plan?

GEN. KWAST: Now, that's a very good question. And I heard you very clearly that time; thank you very much.

And the two are not mutually exclusive. Again, this is based on medical care and capacity; those are the two drivers here. And there are some patients that are stable enough and the medical situation is such that they can go straight back home.

The reality is, Balad does not have the same capacity as Landstuhl. So again, there's a triage decision-making process with the professionals that know exactly what they're doing making the call, and the capacity that we preserve at Balad can be increased by taking some patients straight back home.

So, again, not being in my lane there, but watching the process, that would be, you know, my assumption: that they are preserving capacity at Balad by taking those patients that can go straight home straight home, but that it is not done on anything other than medical facts in the case to maximize care and protection and survivability of every single fine American that is suffering in this regard.

MODERATOR: You're up.

Q General, hi. Kevin Baron from Stars and Stripes. On the same topic, I still wanted to know how many bodies had gone to Iraq, whether wounded, casualties or any other kind of medical evac. And what

happened to the route through Spain? Is that still -- is that a third option that's still going on, or is that -- is this a change as instead of?

GEN. KWAST: I appreciate that question. And what I'll do is I'll get you those numbers so you have them, and I'll make sure that those are given to you by the headquarters. So we'll get you the numbers that you're looking for so that we get those facts straight and accurate.

With regard to other options, all the options out there are always being considered. Every time a decision is made, we look at all the capacity from here home to make sure that each case is being decided on based on the facts in the case, the medical realities, and that it's a person with the medical credentials to make that call, and then we execute that decision-making process based on medical evaluations.

MODERATOR: Justin.

Q General, Justin Fishel with Fox News. I've got sort of a broader-picture question. A new DOD report on Iran says that Iran is known to provide weapons in country to various insurgent groups. I'm wondering if you've seen any evidence of that and if any of these weapons pose a specific threat to what you do there in Afghanistan.

GEN. KWAST: Right. Well, I thank you for that question. And, you know, forgive me that this is not a classified VTC, so my answer cannot be too nuanced or detailed. But I will tell you that any country that supports the insurgents is a threat.

It doesn't matter what they might be providing. It is a threat. The question is, how catastrophic is that threat? And how potentially devastating is it?

So I think even in all the open sources that we've read, we've seen reflections that Iran, you know, has been at least accused of doing this. And even though I have no direct knowledge specifically, I can tell you that if that were the case, that would not be good and that this is one of those situations where any state that is supplying our enemy is not a friend to the coalition. And that needs to be addressed.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra.

To follow up on Justin's question, about if Iran is supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan, have you found any proof that there are some Iranian weapons in Afghanistan that are delivering sophisticated weapons to the militants within Taliban?

GEN. KWAST: Right, well, the answer to that is that, you know, I cannot speak to any of the classified information that may be out there.

I will tell you that, you know, as we fight this enemy, the enemy has weapons. You see it. You read about it. They shoot at us with bullets. They shoot at us with RPGs. They shoot at us with all types of weapons.

And whether those weapons have come from a certain nation state or whether they have come from funding from certain states, it's impossible to tell on the battlefield without some of the forensics.

And if you go and do those forensics, usually that's in a classified realm. And I can't speak to this on this VTC unfortunately, so forgive me for that.

Q General, I had a question for Sea Power Magazine. We've heard a lot of General McChrystal's emphasis on avoiding collateral damage, civilian casualties. And a lot of that has restricted the air strikes. How are your men -- your crews handling that? Are you still sending missions up to be ready if

they're needed, or are you waiting for -- you know, on alert? It just seems that your guys are not having anything to do if you're not able to do direct support for the ground troops.

GEN. KWAIST: No, I thank you for that question, because this is one of those misconceptions in the American media that I'd like to address, and that is that the more this fight is a counterinsurgency, the more powerful air power is, the more useful it is. We fly more now than we ever have, because we need to be there for the ground force commander, the troops on the ground. And we are there to support them directly.

And, you know, even though General McChrystal has a tactical directive that helps us do the right thing, where the people of this country are the center of gravity, and we're here not to kill the enemy, but to protect the Afghan people, we fly those missions to protect the coalition, to protect the Afghan people and to protect this country they live in, from their homes to their irrigation systems, to their orchards. We're here to protect them.

And air power can be applied in so many ways. We can be there to shut down the enemy's communication so they can't fight. We can be there to be the eye in the sky so we can see the enemy, we can hear the enemy, we can understand what they're doing and we can wait and have tactical patience to wait until the enemy is in a place where there are no civilians.

So just the opposite is true. Your assumption that we are doing less because of the tactical directive -- we are actually doing more. And not only are we doing more, but what we are doing is more profoundly bringing us to victory here, because it is more focused on protecting the people.

Now, it's true that we still go after the enemy. And if there are enemy combatants out there, those insurgents that are trying to kill Afghan people, that are trying to kill coalition forces, we will be there to protect those coalition forces. That has not changed. But we have had an opening now to do even more in the counterinsurgency to help the people of Afghanistan.

MODERATOR: Okay. Let's go to the back, and then we will return to Barbara.

Q General, it's Michael Evans from The London Times. Nevertheless what you -- despite what you've said, are you significantly reducing the number of bombing missions that you have -- that you have ordered since the tactical directive from General McChrystal? And there's one more question, but I'll ask it in a minute.

GEN. KWAIST: Yes, and again, it was a little garbled, but I think your question was have we reduced the number of bombing missions we have flown since the tactical directive. And the answer is, we have dropped fewer bombs since the tactical directive, because the ground force commanders are becoming more and more focused on protecting the people instead of chasing the enemy.

Now, you have to still chase the enemy. Both of these are important. But the emphasis has been placed on helping bring, you know, the governance and the development and the security of the Afghan people. And so that focus has had the effect of fewer bombs dropped.

But that is a good-news story, because it means we're getting it right.

MODERATOR: Do you want do a follow-up?

Q Can I ask -- you opened your -- you started your opening remarks by saying that Afghanistan was now strategically -- very strategically important place at the moment. Can I be bold to ask you, do you envisage the use of any of your air assets in Afghanistan for any possible future operation against Iran?

GEN. KWAIST: Well, I appreciate that question. And you know, the reality is that the coalition that is here is focused on the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. And any adjustments to that set of constructs

that we are working towards lies in the realm of, you know, presidents and policymakers that really are the ones that are responsible for making those strategic decisions.

So I can't speak to anything with regard to how forces might be shifted or postured. We are here to focus on saving the Afghan people, bringing security and peace to them, bringing them what they desperately want, and that is to be able to raise their children, love their families, just like we are able to do, with a sense of security to do so freely. And we stay focused on that.

MODERATOR: I think -- (off mike).

Q General, you talked about how you're getting the wounded to care and eventually back to the United States. What is the -- with the volcano continuing, what is the route now, the air route, for the return to Dover Air Force Base of those killed in action? How are you bringing them home? And what is the delay in returning those remains to Dover right now?

GEN. KWAST: Yeah. Well, I thank you for that question. And it goes back to something I said at one of the earlier questions. And that is, we keep open-minded with the entire spectrum of options out there in Europe.

There are many places in Europe we can use as staging places to move forward and have the same effect that we have going to Landstuhl.

So the reality is there's no delay, it's just a different route. And it's predicated on how far south that volcanic ash is drifting. So we watch the jet stream every day. We watch the weather patterns to see how that ash is manifesting itself in the sky. And we watch the volcano to see how it's going.

And every day is a different decision. Every case, every medical case is a different decision. But one thing is not compromised, and that is the safety and the health of these fine young warriors who are giving and sacrificing for all of us to have a world free of extremists that are trying to do harm to our globe.

So you can rest assured that every day is looked at very closely and every case is sent back home with dignity, with care and with prudence to make sure that there is no degradation in the highest quality of care that is given to these wonderful soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and civilians that are doing so much for our country.

Q It probably got garbled and you didn't hear the full question. I was actually asking about the return of remains to Dover Air Force Base of those killed in action. How is that now taking place since they can't be taken back through the usual routes in Europe? And what delays are being experienced in the return of remains to Dover Air Force Base?

GEN. KWAST: Thank you for that. And my apology, I did mishear that question. And the answer to your question though is that it has not changed. The route of flight for these -- forgive the fact that we don't have perfect conditions here, so they fly in my eye.

But the answer to your question is that the construct for bringing home our fallen heroes has not changed at all. And the predicate is getting them home to their families as quickly as possible.

That is not delayed at all based on the ash. They just take a route that's just slightly south of that volcanic ash. But they are moved forward with all due speed. And that structure has not changed.

We again look at all of the options we have in Europe between here and home. And we make sure that those remains fly out on the first available aircraft, to get back to their families with honor and with dignity.

In fact, I was just at the site of an aircraft this morning, where we were sending home a young man that was killed in that suicide-vest attack in Kabul yesterday. And he is getting home.

And we track that timeline to the second, literally from the moment his remains arrive here at Bagram to the moment he's back at Dover. And there has been no degradation in the speed and the efficiency and the dignity and respect, with which those remains have come back home, since the volcanic eruption.

Q General, Otto Kreisher again.

We've been talking about outbound flights. But you're in the middle of a fairly major buildup there in Afghanistan and the constant resupply of the people who are there.

How is the volcano situation affecting your inbound transport?

GEN. KWAST: Yes, it is affecting it.

And, you know, we read in open source, you know, how this has been the most devastating, you know, transportation crisis we've seen -- in recent memory, anyway. But the reality, though, is when you're working a logistics structure like we have here, it's all about priorities. So the fact that it has delayed -- or trapped, in some cases -- logistics flow in Europe that we expected here, we prioritize, and we make sure those things we absolutely, positively have to have here, we get here.

And so we may not have the same volume or speed in the short run, but we get what we need. And we make a plan to ensure we make up for that loss over the long run. So what you'll see is, if you could see it on a chart, you would see a potential dip. But we would prioritize such that those things that are getting here, and the many, many ways we have of getting things here, that we're getting what we need and it's prioritized, and that we will make up for it over the next few weeks and months, based on that prioritization scheme that is directly connected to the president's priorities and to the coalition priorities.

MODERATOR: Fine. But if you will indulge me, one more question -- (audio break) -- and, Lou, you get the last one.

Q Thank you, Bryan.

General, it's Lou Martinez, with ABC News. Just two quick questions. You spoke about fewer bombs being dropped. Does that place a greater emphasis or a greater importance on the show-of-force mission as part of the counterinsurgency mission? And also, the MC-12 Liberty aircraft, do you have any in theater now? And if so, what kind of impact are they having as your eyes and ears up in the sky? And how many do you anticipate on having over the coming months?

GEN. KWAST: Right. Well, I thank you for the question. Let me make sure I heard the first question properly. The second question was on the MC-12, the Liberty ships, and how that's going. And the first question was on the fact that in this counterinsurgency we have more shows of force. Is that a correct restatement of your question, sir?

Q That's about right, sir, yeah. It's about whether you're having greater emphasis on shows of force because you're dropping fewer bombs.

GEN. KWAST: Right. Well -- yes, I thank you for those questions. And to take the first question first, and that's with regard to the shows of force, one thing to realize about Afghanistan that is very different than Iraq, and really anywhere else we've been, is that Afghanistan has a culture where people are living in such remote areas that every single valley is a different place, every single situation is different.

And so the use of air power is different in every situation. So the ground force commander out there in one valley, a show of force might be a good thing, and we see it more often in certain places, but in

another valley it might be something that is not helpful. You know, the people may not appreciate it. So as we put ourselves in the shoes of the Afghan people, making sure we are doing things that help them, that bring them security, different ground force commanders use air power differently.

So the answer to your question on shows of force: In some places it has gone up, in other places it has not. But it's predicated on the fact that every village is different and every village needs a different solution. And that solution is something that is in the hands of the ground force commander, that Army soldier out there, that company commander that knows the people, that's been living with the people for the last year, that knows the elders. And he knows exactly what kind of air effects he needs to bring to that valley to ensure that he's bringing security, he's bringing development and he's bring governance to that village.

So the shows of force, it's a mixed bag. But on a whole, we see more of them with this tactical directive.

With regard to your second question, that Liberty ship, that MC- 12, is a godsend. I cannot tell you how happy the ground force commanders are to have that capability here. It brings something we have not had before in the way it latches so many capabilities together. And it is -- it is a blessing, and it's saving lives every time it flies. So we are grateful to have it here.

With regard to the numbers, that kind of dips into the classified section, but I will tell you that they are delivering them as fast as they can and they are delivering them in sufficient numbers to meet the requirement that's here.

MODERATOR: Well, General, we have actually gone over our time, and so I want to thank you for being so gracious with it and for addressing our questions here. Before I bring it to an end, though, let me just make sure that you don't have any final remarks that you'd like to make.

GEN. KWAST: No, I just want to thank you, though, each of you, because the questions you asked today really belie a deep concern and care for our fine Americans that are fighting here: civilians, Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force, you know. And I appreciate that compassion that really drives you questions. And that -- by telling the story to the American people, we are stronger as a nation.

So I'm just grateful for what you do and the role you play in helping to bring the truth to the American people, because that truth is what keeps us all free, and that's what will help us win this endeavor, that helping the Afghan people find their own security, stand on their own two feet and be able to provide for their future, so that we can eventually move back home.

So thank you again for your time, and God bless all of you for what you do and the role you play in victory here in Afghanistan.

MODERATOR: Thank you, General, and hopefully in a couple of months we'll be able to have you back in this forum. Thanks again.

GEN. KWAST: Thank you, sir, and out from Afghanistan.

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