

1st Combat Camera Squadron

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By [Marc Yablonka](#)

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Master Sergeant Christopher Nolan of the 1st Combat Camera Squadron shoots video on top of an Army dump truck during the cleanup of Dora, Iraq. (Photo by Stephen Phillips 55 Signal Company Combat Camera)

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, SOUTH CAROLINA—"Sometimes you get so into the moment documenting the battle that you are separated from reality and you feel indestructible," said Master Sgt. Christopher Nolan, videographer with the U.S. Air Force's 1st Combat Camera Squadron, Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina.

"But that is how people get injured or killed. They look through the lens of the camera and it doesn't seem real. When one of your guys goes down from a bullet or IED {Improvised Explosive Device}, it shakes you to the core, but you jump into action and do whatever it takes to save him," said the Master Sgt., who is from Crestview, Fl.

Even so, Pulitzer Prize-winning Associated Press photojournalist, the late Eddie Adams, who took the famous photo of Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a Viet Cong cadre in the head at point blank range on the streets of Saigon during the Vietnam war, once philosophized that his camera was, in effect, his own weapon; that there was a weird sense of protection sought and found while peering through the viewfinder to get the shot in combat.

That philosophy was recently brought up to four shooters from the 1-CCS—whose recent job has been to document soldiers and Marines in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan ever since Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom commenced.

Eddie Adams's thoughts were addressed with varying degrees of acceptance and denial.

“Every day I shoot, I feel separated from the action because it just doesn’t seem real looking through the viewfinder,” said Master Sgt. Nolan, who, like many of the 38 other videographers and 36 still photographers in the squadron, recently returned from Iraq, where he was assigned to Balad Air Base.

“The best way to shoot is with one eye open to help make everything more realistic,” the Master Sgt. said. “The camera can do more damage than a gun if used properly.”

Still photographer Master Sgt. Kenneth Bergmann runs lukewarm on Adams’s theory.

“My viewfinder is my `protection,’” he concurs. “When I am shooting carnage and death, it gives me the separation to make me feel like it’s not really there so I can concentrate on my job and make sure I get it right,” said Bergmann, who calls Charleston home.

“Later on, I play it back in my head and then it affects me. But my camera never makes me feel safe. If anything, it makes me stand out and makes me a target in some places. Safe? No. My training and awareness keep me safe,” added Bergmann, who last year returned from a tour of duty at FOB (Forward Operating Base) Warhorse near Baquabah, Iraq.

Staff Sergeant Jacob Bailey, still photographer, negates Adams’s theory completely.

“I personally don’t feel that way. A roadside bomb does not discriminate. I’ve found that listening to soldiers around me and following their lead provides the best protection,” said the Harrisonburg, Va. native.



Sr. Airman Holmgren

Sr. Airman Justin Holmgren, videographer with the 1-CCS, concurs with the Staff Sgt.

“I feel the opposite of how Mr. Adams felt. I would have been a lot more comfortable with a weapon in my hand than my camera, but I knew that if I needed a weapon, I had it close.”

And those in the squadron do need to keep the likes of their GAU-5 rifles and 9mm Beretta side arms close at every moment, in addition to their Nikon D-2Xs and what Holmgren termed “Nikon glass” (lenses), which the still shooters tote, and the Sony PD-150 cameras, DSR-V10 DV cam decks, the Sachtler tripods, Alien War computers with Avid Pro HD that the videographers lug into battle.

Every day, as with the soldier and Marine units to which they are assigned, is a constant watch for trouble signs: suspicious speeding automobiles, the ever present danger of IEDs, even the children.

“During dismounted patrols, Iraqi children will always want to touch you or {try to} get something from you,” Master Sgt. Nolan said.

“You want to play with them, but you know the kids could divert your attention from the threat. When all the kids run away without warning, you know it is time to take cover and prepare for trouble,” he added.

The on-going mental preparation for photographing the troops’ missions is equaled by what the shooters have to do once they load their camera gear on top of their body armor.

“After getting all your gear together, you roll to the unit you will be going with,” said Nolan, who has been assigned to the 1st and 4th Infantry, 82nd and 101st Airborne, and 10th Mountain Divisions during two tours in Iraq.

“You load the Humvees, Strykers (armored cars), or Bradleys (tanks) and depart for your mission. Prior to departing the base, you will stop and load your weapons. You will either “go yellow” (weapon loaded, nothing in the chamber) or “go red” (loaded and ready to fire), and then arrive at the Entry Control Point,” he said.

From there all the troops, combat cameramen and women among them, are on a very high state of alert.

“You never feel so alive as when you know you could be killed any minute,” Nolan said.

For Sr. Airman Holmgren, who was assigned to the 4th Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions in Diyala Province, close to Baqubah and Hib-Hib, where Abu-Musab Al Zarqawi was killed, the days and weeks very quickly became routine.

Though he would sometimes go out on night missions, most the time, he and his partner (1-CCS shooters always go out in pairs, usually one videographer and one still photographer), would hook up with the unit, discuss the goals, who exactly the unit was tracking down, and how long it would be “outside the wire,” as he called leaving the semi-safe confines of their base of operations.

“The missions could last anywhere from two to four days in the field. After we returned to the FOB, I would download and edit the footage that I shot and send it out to our Combat Camera Headquarters in Baghdad, and they would send it on to the Pentagon,” said the Sr. Airman, who hails from Tremonton, Utah.

Staff Sgt. Bailey, while deployed in 2006 to Tal Afar, was assigned to several Army units—172 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade and the 542nd Air Ambulance.

In his own endeavor to stay alive, he felt the days and weeks start to blur into one another. There were certain things in his routine which he did to try to avoid that.

“I tried to approach each day as a blank slate. That’s what a day in a war zone is for me as a photographer,” the Staff Sgt. said. “A blank roll of film.”

1-CCS’s counter parts in the traditional media also had their “blank rolls of film” to shoot, and while there is, as Airman Holmgren states, a bond between combat camera personnel, the same may or may not be said of the bond between combat shooters and their counterparts in the traditional media.

“I have had mixed encounters with the civilian media,” said Master Sgt. Bergmann.

And while he did not elaborate upon those mixed encounters, he did say, “We are the eyes of the eagle and our mission is to show our leaders and the world what is happening, good or bad.”

Whereas the traditional media has emphasized the negative in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bergmann clearly sees the mission in a different light.

“There is so much good we are doing there. So, yes we {the traditional media and the military journalists} have very different jobs,” he stressed.

“Boots on the ground. Here is what happened,” added Bergman, who in addition to his fire power carries five knives into battle with him.

Staff Sgt. Bailey is a little more at ease being in the field with the civilian photographers however.

“We’re both out there to tell the story through pictures. There’s a bit of camaraderie that occurs; competition too,” stressed the Staff Sgt.

“I’ve had a few civilian photographers display genuine interest in what I do and they’ve provided mentorship and given me valuable advice.”

Just the same, Bailey feels he, at times, is destined to hand out a helping word or two as well.

“I’ve given my share of advice too,” he continued. “For instance, ‘Don’t wear that red shirt!’”

What apprehension might be found between the squadron and media is also sometimes evident among the troops that the squadron photographs—at least in the beginning.

“At first, all the guys we went out with viewed us with apprehension. ‘Here’s another person I have to watch out for.’ But after a few missions, they realize that we are trained at an even or higher level. They accept us as ‘team members,’” Master Sgt. Bergmann said.

Holmgren, who admitted that he often got the “Who are you?” looks, agreed.

“It seemed like at first they were reluctant to have someone with a camera around, but as I got to know them and work with them, they would warm up. Just giving them pictures or a short video clip seems to bridge a working relationship, and I think that it helps build morale,” Holmgren added.

“Once you give them a disc with video clips on it, you become their new best friend,” Nolan agreed.

“I did my best to show the units I’m a useful asset too. I’d pull security when needed. I really felt as if I were part of the units, especially the 542nd Air Ambulance,” Holmgren said.

“They considered me their fifth man when we flew. Sometimes photography had to take a back seat and I helped load and unload wounded U.S. and Iraqi Soldiers, and civilians onto the helicopters,” he added.



Waiting for a Blackhawk to pick us up.

The Sr. Airman even helped prep the “bird”, as he called the Blackhawk helicopter he flew in, with the Crew Chief. He even assisted the flight medic by holding medical instruments.

Master Sgt. Nolan concurs with others in the squadron on the issue of how welcome the shooters are.

“When we first show up to document a mission, most don’t want us around because they don’t think we understand it,” he said.

“But after that, the perception changes a lot. Once they realize that we can talk the talk and walk the walk, we become part of the team,” he said.

Nolan, in his tours in theatre, has shown he can truly do both with the best of them. He has been hit by three IEDs, one of which killed a radio operator and injured the driver. A third caused injuries to his back and ears from the concussion.

“I have hearing aides in both ears, five bulging discs, two cracked vertebrae, and another one out of alignment because of what I have been through in Iraq, but I am still willing to go back,” he said.

“When you are in combat, your priority is to document the mission,” he added. Every person needs to search inside himself to find the right time to drop the camera and pick up a weapon.

“My first fire fight I dropped my camera and started shooting back when the enemy was over 300 yards away. My last fire fight, the enemy was around 50 yards away, but I kept documenting the action. It is a matter of experience and comfort level,” he said.

Staff Sgt. Bailey, whose awards include Military Photographer of the Year in 2004 and honorable mention for the same award in 2005 for images he shot in Baghdad, had a harrowing experience or two of his own:

While in Baghdad in 2004, he documented the aftermath of car bomb that rocked the building he was quartered in.

“I got my camera and ran to the scene. It was the first time I’d seen that type of destruction and violence firsthand. It was overwhelming at first, but I put the camera to my face and just started working,” he recalled.

“When I finished and finally took a good look at what I had been photographing, I was numb.”

In an e-mail, Nolan went on to describe the aftermath and the carnage:

“A distressed Iraqi man came up holding a box containing what looked like coals wrapped in tattered, burnt rags with splotches of bright red here and there. He was saying something in Arabic and I couldn’t understand him. Finally, he said in English, ‘It’s meat. Human meat.’

“The war was very real to me then.”

Another of the realities of waging war in the high degree heat of the Middle East is the toll the temperature takes on the camera equipment used by the squadron.

Sr. Airman Holmgren did not have too many complaints even though he was in Iraq from May to September when the temperature reached 130 degrees.

“I did have problems with one of my cameras, but I was pretty impressed with how the Sony PD 150 held up in the sand,” he said.

Master Sgt. Bergmann seemed to think that what he called the “talcum powder dust” and the rain took their toll on his equipment.

Master Sgt. Nolan was equally negative about weather and how it affected his camera equipment.

“The heat and dust play havoc on the gear. I had to clean it after every mission. I would get a lot of video dropout because of sand in the camera,” he remembered.

“The winters in Afghanistan were brutal on batteries. They would drain real quickly if I didn’t keep them warm,” he added.

Once again, Bailey is right in step with the others.

“It’s a constant battle. I was always cleaning my lenses. Jumping in and out of vehicles took its toll. My gear got pretty nicked up. It was unavoidable that a few of my lenses bit the bullet. Luckily, I brought back up lenses with similar focal lengths and I was able to complete my mission with what I had,” he said.

And completing the mission successfully is what the 1st Combat Camera Squadron has always been about. They are, as Bergmann put it, “the Special Forces of their world.”

Theirs is a cyclical world and they are constantly on the go. Nolan put it best when he said, “After processing your footage and sending it to the imagery management team, you eat dinner, shower, then go to bed so that it can happen {all over} again in a few hours.

“The feeling is amazing when you are documenting history. You see what is really going on, not just what the media want to show you. You see the interaction with the locals, good and bad. When you look into the eyes of some of the children and see the pain from what they have been through, you realize why you are fighting the war,” Nolan said.

“It is not about today, but the children of tomorrow,” said Nolan. “Whatever we need to do to complete the mission must be done.”