



**TEN THOUSAND FEET ABOVE** an area near the city of Ghazni in southeastern Afghanistan, Lt. Col. John Marks—call sign “Karl”—adjusted the zoom for the infrared sensor in the Litening pod on his right wing. Peering at the infrared image on the right-hand multi-function display in his instrument panel, he noticed something different about the groups of people the sensor had picked up.

“Mutant-42,” a Joint Terminal Attack Controller, was on the radio with Marks and his wingman, Capt. Jerrod “Marshall” Dillon. Sgt. Houston Thomas, the controller, had called for air support from Marks’ flight to aid an Army unit that had been ambushed by Taliban fighters near a village.

Since 1988, Lt. Col. John “Karl” Marks has been flying the A-10. With over 7,000 hours and counting in the brutish fighter, Marks is the highest time Hog driver in Air Force history. (Photo by Ted Carlson/Fotodynamics.com)

# HIGH-TIME HOG DRIVER

Inside the cockpit with **Lt. Col. John Marks**, the Air Force’s most experienced A-10 pilot

BY JAN TEGLER

Taking fire, the unit retreated to a ditch near the six MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) trucks they'd gone out on patrol in. They needed the firepower "Hawg-63"—Marks' flight—could bring to the fight but there was a complication.

Marks, now on his fourth deployment to Afghanistan with the 303rd Fighter Squadron, recognized that some of the people the Army soldiers wanted his flight to strafe might not actually be Taliban fighters.

"I picked up the groups they were describing with my sensor pod," Marks recalls. "And I noticed that they're moving differently from Taliban, moving like western or western-trained troops. It's very distinct. I told them, 'I see a group here and another group here. They do not appear to be moving like Taliban.'"

"Stand by! Stand by!" the JTAC replied.

## MARKS RECOGNIZED THAT SOME OF THE PEOPLE THE ARMY SOLDIERS WANTED HIS FLIGHT TO STRAFE MIGHT NOT ACTUALLY BE TALIBAN FIGHTERS.



Sgt. Houston Thomas (left), call sign "Mutant-42," was the JTAC who directed Marks and Dillon on their July 22, 2014 mission. Here he poses with Lt. Col. Marks (right) at Bagram Air Base. (Photo courtesy Lt. Col. John Marks)

### 1988

That's the year Marks began flying the Air Force's legendary A-10. Thirty three years later, he's still at it.

Lt. Col. Marks has accumulated an amazing 7,025 flight hours (and counting) in the Thunderbolt II, more commonly referred to as the "Warthog." That amounts to 292 days or almost 10 months in the air ... in a fighter aircraft! He's flown 3,625 sorties, including 358 combat sorties with a total of 1,150 combat flight hours.

From combat in Desert Storm in 1991 to his most recent tour in Afghanistan in 2020—his sixth deployment to the country—Marks has more time and experience flying the A-10 than anyone in U.S. Air Force history.

Marks became fascinated by the A-10 in high school and college and vowed that if he ever got to fly in the Air Force, he'd "fly one of those." Having successfully made it through pilot training, he applied for and got the only Hog slot open to his class.

"As they say, with a lot of things in life you don't want to meet your heroes but it definitely didn't disappoint," Marks says remembering the first time he walked up to an A-10 at Davis-Monthan AFB near Tucson, Arizona.

Marks was struck by how physically imposing the Hog was in its dark green camouflage paint scheme.

"You don't get a sense of the size of the thing until you walk up to it," he remarks. "You can pretty nearly walk under it and not crouch over, and I'm about 6 feet tall. I've often said if I could buy my own squadron of A-10s and operate them, I'd definitely paint them in that menacing dark green!"

"You climb up into the airplane and there's very good visibility," Marks adds. "The cockpit rails are low and you can see what's around you pretty well. Looking forward isn't the best because you're looking through two panes of glass in the heads-up display separated by a couple of inches and then the bulletproof glass in front of that. But we look around that to each side generally."

Marks' first flight in the brawny fighter recalled an earlier era when pilots graduated from two-seat trainers



directly into single-seat fighters. A single dual-seat YA-10B Warthog was built by Fairchild-Republic early on as a prototype to demonstrate an all-weather, night-attack version, but there were no two-seat training versions of the A-10.

"Your first time in the A-10 was your first flight," Marks says.

Accompanied by an instructor flying another A-10A, Marks admits that most of his first flight was a blur, but he does remember being amazed that he'd achieved his ambition.

"You didn't get to shoot the gun. You just went up and did typical aircraft handling

Marks stands alongside his favorite feature of the A-10, its 7-barrel 30 mm cannon, as a 1st Lieutenant during Desert Storm. Marks is famed for destroying a record 23 Iraqi tanks in one three-mission day on February 25, 1991. (Photo courtesy Lt. Col. John Marks)



A-10Cs of the 303rd Fighter Squadron in formation near Whiteman AFB, Missouri. Marks has been with the 303rd for well over a decade, surpassing the 6,000 and 7,000 flying hours marks and making multiple combat deployment to Afghanistan with the squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo via DVIDs)

maneuvers and then came back and landed. I couldn't believe I'd just gotten to fly it. When can we do that again!"

Marks says the big twin-engine jet flies just like his instructors said it would, "like a big Cessna in the sense that it has a fat straight wing. We did stalls on the first flight, and it's very easy to handle."

"The one thing about the A-10 is that it feels like you're trying to balance on a stool because it doesn't

really trim out," he notes. "You're always trimming. It really likes to roll off one way or the other. It's really sensitive to roll inputs."

A-10s didn't have autopilots until the early 1990s, forcing pilots to constantly trim the fighter on long ocean crossings "and they're all long in the A-10," Marks jokes. But even today, "guys love flying this airplane because you still have to fly the airplane," he quickly adds.

### July, 22 2014, 1830 Hours, 10,000 feet

Marks and Dillon had been aloft for about 90 minutes when Thomas first called them. They'd launched from Bagram Air Base to take over the combat air patrol A-10s were constantly on-call for in Afghanistan.

"There were always A-10s airborne somewhere, 24 hours a day typically," Marks explains. "We would preposition where they felt the highest risk areas were

at a given point in time. We were pretty close to Ghazni. It was definitely one of the high risk areas. It was maybe only 10 minutes away. That was typically the goal, to have A-10s overhead within 10 minutes."

The hours near sunrise and sunset were always dangerous in "hot counterinsurgency areas" like the villages near Ghazni, Marks says. It was at these points in the day that U.S. Army troops would venture out from the safety of their forward bases into villages and towns

## THE SECOND DAY OF DESERT STORM'S GROUND WAR, THEN 1ST LT. MARKS AND HIS WINGMAN CAPT. ERIC "FISH" SALOMONSON SET A RECORD BY DESTROYING 23 IRAQI TANKS IN ONE THREE-MISSION DAY—AN EXPLOIT HE'S STILL FAMOUS FOR.

to see if they could draw Taliban fighters from the shadows.

"It was one of our tactics," Marks explains. "In any insurgency, the hardest part is to get the enemy to attack you in a situation where you can identify them. We were always on edge for missions early or late in the day because we knew that their goal was to take fire and be able to use us to respond."

When the unit the Hog drivers had



ABOVE: Munitions systems airmen load foot-long 30 mm slugs into an A-10's GAU-8/A Gatling gun at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo via DVIDS)

OPPOSITE PAGE: Lt. Col. Marks on the ramp at Whiteman AFB just after the flight during which he passed the 7,000 hour mark in the Hog. Note the patch on the left sleeve of his flight suit that reads "Send It!"

been called upon to support dismantled from their MRAPs, they were not alone. Marks says that at that point in the war, U.S.-trained Afghan Army units would be tasked to accompany American soldiers "and meet with folks in the villages and sweep through the towns." If there had to be any houses searched, "they would let the Afghans do it because we didn't want Americans doing it if we could avoid it."

Ten minutes after getting the call from Thomas, Hawg-63 was overhead with Marks and Dillon using their Litening pods

to help sort out the Taliban "from the friendlies." The American soldiers wanted the A-10s to strafe the enemy insurgents they'd draw into the open "while they finished setting up their defenses near their vehicles," Marks remembers.

That's when Marks reported that one or more of the groups of people the Army troops had described as Taliban fighters didn't look like insurgents. Seconds later, Thomas radioed that "several elements" of the Army/Afghan force had become separated. The elements were the Afghans.

"Our guys often lost track of where the Afghan troops were," Marks recalls. "They'd have a game plan, but pretty frequently the Afghan Army soldiers would go off of the plan and not follow what was going on."

"I definitely think those are your guys," I told them. 'Let's wait and see where they go and what they do.' Sure enough they made their way back toward the friendly position.

Marks and Dillon watched for several minutes until the soldiers reported that everyone was back and made a couple extra sweeps overhead to make sure no other Afghans were separated. It was time to roll in and use the A-10's most famous weapon, its fearsome GAU-8/A seven-barrel Gatling gun, a 30 mm cannon that can rip tanks, buildings and troops apart like a hot knife through butter.

### The Gun Never Gets Old

Marks sings a familiar tune when, like other A-10 pilots, he says firing the 30 mm cannon "never gets old."

"It's still by far my favorite part of flying the plane!"

If Marks' recollection of his first flight in the A-10 is a bit of blur, his memory of the first time he fired its gun at the Barry Goldwater conventional gun ranges near Gila Bend, Arizona is crystal-clear.

"The first time firing the gun, I was expecting to do maybe a 50-round burst



and I think I shot about 10. I came off the trigger and I know I definitely said an expletive out loud. The whole airplane shakes and you smell the gun gas coming into the cockpit. I don't remember how good my hits were, but it was awesome!"

The gun was one of the weapons he used on February 25th, 1991, the second day of Desert Storm's ground war, when then 1st Lt. Marks and his wingman Capt. Eric "Fish" Salomonson set a record by destroying 23 Iraqi tanks in one three-mission day—an exploit he's still famous for.

Ask Marks what's changed most about flying and fighting the A-10 since Desert Storm and he'll cite several differences, from the altitudes—1,500 feet or lower during the Cold War—and attitudes—"there's no necessity to dive at the ground with smart weapons"—to bombing with the naked eye. Thirty years ago, A-10 pilots didn't have today's computing and stabilization systems that help them precisely strike targets with laser-guided versions of the Maverick missile and the Joint Direct Attack Munition kit that turns dumb bombs into GPS-guided smart bombs.

But one capability stands out. "I'd have to say the biggest change is the helmet-mounted cueing system combined with the Litening pod," Marks says.

"It's an unbelievable capability where you can look at something with your helmet-mounted sight, slew your targeting pod there instantly, zoom in, and you're looking at details we could have only dreamed of from many miles away. You can get a weapon on the way to wherever you want to look in a short time with a few button pushes. It still seems like science fiction to me!"

### Here comes the "Monster!"

For several years after the 303rd's 2014 deployment to Afghanistan, its pilots wore patches on the shoulders of their flight suits emblazoned with the expression, "We're the Monster!"

The expression derives from Taliban communications intercepted by U.S. Army interpreters eavesdropping on the insurgents to get battle damage

assessments.

"On one of the missions, the JTAC (Joint Terminal Attack Controller) had relayed to our guy right after a strafing mission that the interpreter told them the Taliban said, 'We have just lost three more brothers to the Monster.'"

The distinctive sound of the A-10's General Electric TF34-GE-100 turbofan engines, the unforgettable "Brrrtt!!" of its Gatling gun and the havoc it could wreak made the Warthog perhaps the most feared aircraft in Afghanistan.

With the Army unit assuring Marks and Dillon that it had accounted for all of its soldiers and Afghans, they got ready to unleash their Monsters on the Taliban advancing on the convoy.

The high-time Hog driver and his wingman rolled in from about 9,000 feet with their weapon stability augmentation systems turned off to allow them to walk their 30 mm cannon's foot-long slugs up to their targets.

The proximity of the insurgents to the Army/Afghans was alarming—known in Close-Air-Support terms as "danger close." Danger close is anything less than 100 meters from friendly forces.

Marks and Dillon dropped down to 2,000 feet, flying at 350 knots-plus and shot at Taliban just 50 to 75 meters from the Army convoy. Imagine standing under the goal post on a football field with A-10s raining fire on the 50-yard line. That's how close Hawg-63 got to the soldiers.

The duo made a second pass and fired a total of 240 rounds of 30 mm. The effect was just what the Army/Afghan group needed. Taliban fighters either succumbed to the onslaught or fled. Marks and Dillon had video footage from their Hogs, but this time they also were able to see footage from the American soldiers wearing GoPros, giving them a rare glimpse of the violence their strafing runs produced.

"The Army unit was running low on ammunition and there was so much going on that you just don't see from the air," Marks says. "From up above, often things don't seem very intense. You're like, 'Ok I see some guys here and there go some tracers and I see some action over here.' But

THE UNFORGETTABLE "BRRRTT!!" OF ITS GATLING GUN AND THE HAVOC IT COULD WREAK MADE THE WARTHOG PERHAPS THE MOST FEARED AIRCRAFT IN AFGHANISTAN.



An A-10 overflies a team of Joint Terminal Attack Controllers. (U.S. Air Force photo via DVIDS)



Marks in cockpit at Bagram Air Base in 2014. Marks carried American flags drawn and colored by children on the left side of his front canopy into battle with him on combat sorties from Bagram. (Photo courtesy Lt. Col. John Marks)

## YOU CAN LOOK AT SOMETHING WITH YOUR HELMET-MOUNTED SIGHT, SLEW YOUR TARGETING POD THERE INSTANTLY, ZOOM IN, AND YOU'RE LOOKING AT DETAILS WE COULD HAVE ONLY DREAMED OF FROM MANY MILES AWAY.

it's quiet in the cockpit and you're watching it on the sensors."

"But you watch the soldier's footage and you realize how intense it was. There's heavy-duty stuff going on and the sound and the violence of it—it's dramatic."

Marks and Dillon's skill combined with the unmatched close air support chops of the A-10 swiftly won the tricky engagement—just one example of the kind of low-altitude fighting the Monsters and their pilots did repeatedly in Afghanistan.

### Home

Walk out to the flightline at Whiteman AFB on any given day and you're likely to find Lt. Col. Marks readying for another flight in the A-10, instructing 303rd airman who were born well after he started flying the Hog.

Revered in the A-10 world, Marks has flown with generations of A-10 pilots including "the sons of fathers I flew with" and in every version of the Monster up to the latest A-10C. He plans to continue in the cockpit for as long as possible. After all, the A-10 is like home to Marks.

"No matter what's going on with work and the other parts of my job, there's a mental sigh of relief when I get in the airplane," he says. "This is home. The hands know just where to go and I'm confident in the airplane doing what I want it to do. To this day, when I finish a flight and undo my straps, I look around the airplane and think how lucky I am to do what I've done. I don't see that changing." ✈