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The 16th SOW - any time, any place with pride

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Military Affairs Committee

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Tonight I watched some very special men and women perform a job. This was just an ordinary evening at the office for most of these folks but for the 40 or so folks observing it was anything but. We were watching members of the 16th Special Operations Wing stationed at our own Hurlburt Field; and the job was an exercise to both demonstrate their capabilities and hone their skills at the fine art of rescuing a downed airman under hostile conditions.

I say fine art because to watch this ballet of land, air and sea resources precisely and effectively perform this mission with a 25 knot cross wind under low cloud cover with very nasty thunderstorms popping all around was to see poetry in motion. Oh and did I forget to mention in the dark? Dark enough that observers had no idea what happened without night vision goggles even though everything happened only 500 yards from our position.

The exercise began with a flyby consisting of an MMC-130 Combat Talon I and two MH-53 Pave-Low Helicopters simulating the ingress portion of the mission and the capability of long range flight made possible by mid-air refueling. Next up, a group of PJ's or Pararescuemen, complete with an inflatable boat, leapt from the rear of one of the Pave-Lows about 300 yards out in the Gulf. Don't forget that 25 knot wind and rough surf which made that portion a challenge to say the least. They proceeded to shore and located and identified the downed airman.

Meanwhile a Spectre AAC-130 Gunship orbited protectively overhead, providing information and engaging enemy ground troops. After the PJ's made contact with the airman and marked the landing zone, the Pave-Lows swooped back in to pick up the ground force and effectively returned fire because the LZ was still being contested by enemy forces. After the area was clear of friendlies, the Gunship returned to decimate the remaining enemy forces.

Now we've all seen some pretty amazing video of what our fighting men and women do for us - the risks they take and the inhuman feats they perform. But just for a frame of reference, think of the first time you saw a professional football game in person. On TV it looks like it hurts when they collide and yes, you can tell intellectually the receiver jumped really high to catch the ball. But in person you know to your bones it hurt and you can actually see 6 feet of air under that receiver's feet. The next time you see war footage from Afghanistan or wherever on the tube, concentrate on that. Those are bad people trying to kill our friends and neighbors with real bullets. It's a loud and nasty job they do for us and good people get hurt.



Submitted Photo

Members of the 16th SOW utilize a MH-53 Pave-low helicopter to demonstrate nighttime capabilities to rescue a downed airman.

And while the exercise was very impressive, and it was, what's even more impressive were the enlisted folks who came out to take care of us civilians. They were all there voluntarily. Many if not most were there pulling this duty for the opportunity to see the folks on the pointy end of the stick doing their job. The job that all these folks in the background make possible.

One airman I spoke with from Arkansas is typical. The pride he took in doing his job was tangible. He works in one of the shops at Eglin repairing and maintaining some of the gear the operators use in the field. He, along with every other airman there, was unfailingly polite and helpful. He was proud to be doing that job and serving his country.

Now I suppose one might say that an airman being polite and helpful in the presence of enough brass to fill a transport plane is to be expected. But there was a difference. This was sincere.

So here's my pitch. We have men and woman willing to pay the ultimate price for our freedom. We have men and women working in countless support roles to make that possible. We have an obligation to these people. We all owe them a thank you and a pat on the back for what they do for us. We owe them our support and allegiance. We need to go out of our way to help them whenever we interact with them personally or in business.

If someone has a spouse deployed, maybe we can take care of the kids so they can run needed errands. I don't know what your particular skills are, but maybe you can lend a hand when needed. These are our warriors who make our freedoms and very lives possible. They do this job with pride and honor and we should, no we must honor them in big ways and small.

The next time you have an opportunity to do this, make an effort. Say thank you. The motto of the 16th SOW is "Any Time, Any Place". We should also adopt that motto to helping them as they make that real. Offer to help if you can. We really do owe these people our lives and we'd better never forget that.

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