

Desert Litening: The 103rd FW in Iraqi Freedom

by John "Spoons" Sponauer



An A-10 of the 104th FW (Barnes Field, MA). The unit deployed with the 103rd FW of the Connecticut Air National Guard during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 104th A-10s also carry the LITENING targeting pod.

Few modern military aircraft have broken the conventional wisdom of their roles like the A-10 Thunderbolt II (“Warthog”). Designed out of the close air support lessons of the Vietnam jungles, and conceived primarily as a low-level daytime anti-armor weapon for the European theater, the Hog has surprised critics for more than three decades by performing missions in environments wholly unlike both. In 1991’s Operation Desert Storm, A-10s operated at high altitudes, far behind enemy lines, and at night, previously unexpected environments for Hog drivers. Over Kosovo in 1999, it proved adept at the role of AFAC (Airborne Forward Air Control). In Afghanistan, its ability to operate from austere forward bases allows it to operate on the front lines of the war on terror to this day. In 2003, it returned to Iraq for missions both old and new. The ‘old’ were the A-10 staples, ground attack and supporting ground forces in contact with the enemy. The ‘new’ missions came with the introduction of an advanced targeting pod for the aircraft called LITENING II, developed by Northrop Grumman.

The pill-shaped pod, hung on one of the A-10’s eleven underwing hardpoints, brings new capabilities to the jet, including Forward Looking Infra-Red, image-amplified TV, laser target designation, and more. Considering the aircraft was originally designed with no targeting system other than the pilot’s eyeball, this is a monumental leap of capability for the A-10, turning it into a capable all-weather aircraft capable of using precision-guided bombs.

One of the Hog communities taking the lead in the use of the pod was the 103rd Fighter Wing, an Air National Guard unit operating out of Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, CT. The “Flying Yankees” deployed to an undisclosed location in the Middle East in early 2003, just a few months after being selected as one of two ANG units to receive the pod. Joining the Flying Yankees were the other selected unit, the 104th FW of the Massachusetts Air National Guard (located just a few miles away in Westfield, MA). Together, the two units deployed 18 Warthogs for a secretive role in the far western desert of Iraq.



Together, the A-10 units flew 3,100 combat hours during 900 sorties, without damage from enemy fire.

Much of what they did there remains an untold story, overshadowed by the dramatic military drive from Kuwait up the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys into Baghdad. Much of it won't be recorded in public records for some time, as few reporters were embedded with the units participating in the western war. Nonetheless, what happened there remains a key part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I recently had a chance to talk to one of the 103rd pilots who deployed to Iraq to ask his opinions about the pod, how A-10s were used in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and his experiences in combat over the western desert.

Q. The majority of what the public knows about the war in Iraq comes from the eastern part of the country... the drive up through the river valleys into Baghdad. Much of what happened in the western desert seems more 'black.' Even the location of your forward base seems to be classified to this day. Please tell us a little about the type of missions you typically flew out in the Wild West.

A. I'm not sure the location of our base will ever be declassified.

We initially planned for TST (time sensitive targeting) missions. Using JSTARS and other aircraft for targeting, our primary responsibility was the identified 'SCUD zones' that Hussein had used during the first Gulf War to launch SCUD missiles at Israel. Our basic mission was to prevent launches from those zones this time around. In this war, however, all of the ballistic missiles went south instead. So that's the mission we stepped out the door with. As the war progressed, our mission rolled into traditional A-10 missions like CAS (close air support) and CSAR (combat search and rescue) more often. The other type of mission was on-call attack, road reconnaissance, and that type of sortie, especially along the Syrian border helping to prevent Iraqi leadership from leaving the country. We were involved in operations that helped catch at least one of the 'deck of cards,' for instance. The western war was unique. It was more focused on special operations, including working with foreign special operations.

Q. Describe a typical mission for us. Duration? Size of packages? Loadout? Other aircraft?

A. We broke our squadron down into 'day guys' and 'night guys.' You didn't want to move people around between the two because it would play havoc with sleep cycles. A typical night mission would start at around 3 to 6 PM in the afternoon, when the crew would go into the briefing and check the weather, which was often bad. Crews would learn the target set for the mission, but mostly it was based around 30-40 points in the region that we knew were sources of past activity. We'd take off, hit the tanker, and begin our TST tasking. We often found and killed stuff at those points, mostly related support equipment. So that's at least how it started in the beginning of the war. As the war went on, during some battles like Hadithah Dam, for instance, we saw more CAS tasking. In that case, ground forces were preventing the dam from being blown up by the Iraqis, and our missions in support of that operation were more traditional close air support.

Flights were almost always a two-ship; occasionally four-ships. We didn't have much SEAD (suppression of enemy air defenses) support out in the west. As for other aircraft in the area, there was everything... B-52s, F-16s, F-14s, and F-15Es... you name it.



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Q. Did you perform many AFAC missions?

A. Well, for A-10 guys that's always sort of a fallback. Even if we're not FAC trained, it's something we all can do, and we're a better FAC than any other kind of airframe. Did I personally perform FAC missions? No.

But with the pod, we could direct guys on to the target, and we did with F-14s, F-15s, and even other A-10s at times. With the A-10, the pod isn't the technological limitation.

Q. The LITENING II pod integration on the A-10 means you're still using the one small display screen in the cockpit as the display. In the A-10, the pod doesn't project anything onto the HUD (heads up display), for instance. How is the crew workload, in a non-glass cockpit, to use the pod effectively?

A. As far as workload, it's quite a bit higher. You have to realize, though, that the pod is just a tool...it's not an end-all, be-all. Even with it, you can't just wander around blindly out there, and you can't just stare at the screen all the time.

Q. Speaking of saving lives, can you talk about how the pod can be used for both CAS and CSAR?

A. I guess the biggest thing it brings to CSAR is if there is an enemy out there looking for the guys on the ground, the pod would give me the ability to see them easier. The pod brings higher situational awareness to your cockpit and, by extension, your flight.

As for CAS, the same statement applies. Every aircraft doing CAS, whether it's an A-10, F-16, or whatever, is supporting the ground commanders. A-10 guys understand that wars are won by the 18-year-old on the ground with a rifle, and they loved having us overhead. We actually would get called specifically....they would say, "Are you A-10s with the LITENING pod?"

Q. The pod is only mounted on the three or nine pylons. That cuts your ability to carry Maverick missiles by 50%... is that a concern for aircrews?

A. It all depends on how else you load the aircraft. That's the incredible thing about the A-10; you have a lot of options. What we sometimes did was carry the pod on nine and three Mavericks on three using a LAU-88 (multiple missile rack).

Q. Do LITENING-equipped A-10s still carry dumb bombs?

A. Oh yeah, there's still plenty of reasons to carry them. To me, a lot of the mantra of PGMs (precision-guided munitions) is overdone. A well-trained A-10 pilot with Mk82 dumb bombs can hit any target, and the gun is the most precision-guided weapon on the aircraft. Basically, if I can see the target, I can put a dumb bomb on it. With an LGB (laser-guided bomb), if it goes dumb, to a certain extent who knows where it's going to go.

But we did use LGBs effectively. To give you an example, at Hadithah Dam, we came in once as things were winding down, and the folks on the ground wanted us to clean up a number of targets left. We used an LGB and hit a target on the first drop.

Remember, the pod is just one tool.

Q. Was the LITENING pod used on the majority of missions, day and night?

A. In our unit, everybody had a pod, whether they were 'day' or 'night' guys.

Q. Without having an air-to-ground radar, and with a mission that is primarily focused on mobile targets, how do you decide where to aim the pod? Is it visual cueing, cueing from offboard sources like Predator/ground forces, etc?

A. You can do it a couple of ways. You can use it to look at a specific point that you know in advance, which is what we

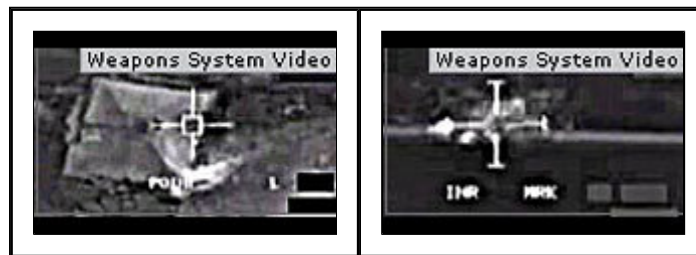


often did as we were examining previously-known sites. Other times, you may not have a specific location, but know generally that you're supposed to be looking on a certain road, river, or wadi. In that case, you can use that reference point to start, and slew the pod along the length of it looking for targets. Flying at night, crews could possibly see something out of their peripheral vision, and quickly slew the pod onto it to take a look at it.

Your eyeball is still your best tool, and even with this pod, using it is still like looking through a soda straw.

The biggest problem with any new piece of equipment is that you are more likely to become either task-saturated or become channelized into what is happening with the pod. So your situational awareness is going to be much lower if you're not careful. If you're channelized on nothing but the TV screen, you're more likely to hit another aircraft, or the ground, by becoming spatially disoriented.

Two short weapon system mpeg videos are available
at the 103rd Fighter Wing, Connecticut Air National Guard web site:
<http://www.ctbrad.ang.af.mil/OIF.html>



Q. You read stories from Desert Storm of A-10 pilots using IR Mavericks (imaging infra-red) as sort of a 'poor-man's pod,' using the IR seeker to spot targets at night. What's the advantage of the LITENING II instead of this method?

A. Using the IR Maverick with the LITENING pod, there's dozens of ways to skin a cat. You could first find a target with the pod, put your eyeball on it, then put your Maverick on it, and fire. You can also spot it with the pod, get the pod coordinates of it, come off target, and then come back in and use your Mavericks that way. It's flexible.

Q. With the arrival of LITENING II, will the USAF/ANG consider purchasing the laser-guided Maverick missile?

A. I don't know; that's several pay grades above me. We don't have any. I haven't spent any time reading about it, just like I haven't been reading about JDAMs. As for Mavericks, I think all A-10 guys love IR Mavericks. Using them, there's a lot of advantages to flying at night. Personally, I wouldn't want a laser Maverick... there's enough new versions of the Maverick now that work fine for us.

Q. What aspect of having the pod on your aircraft do you like the most?

A. Without getting into specifics, I like the detail on targets that I have with it.



Thanks and a note to readers...

A sincere thank you to the personnel of the 103rd FW for their time and effort in conducting this interview, as well as to Dice-Man of the A-10 site **The Warthog Pen** (<http://www.warthogpen.com/>) for putting me in touch with the 103rd. This interview was conducted over the phone, and relayed to the 103rd FW in draft form for their requested review before publication. Some information was removed or edited from that draft for the purposes of operational security.

The **U.S. Air Force** Fact Sheet for LITENING II / ER / AT is here:
<http://www.af.mil/factsheets/factsheet.asp?fsID=114>

The official **Northrop Grumman** LITENING page is here:
<http://www.dsd.es.northropgrumman.com/products/litening/ANAAQ28.html>

The **Aircraft Resource Center** Litening II Targeting Pod page is here:
http://www.aircraftresourcecenter.com/AWA1/401-500/walk482_LiteningPod_Middleton/walk482.htm

The **GlobalSecurity.org** report on the Hadithah Dam is here:
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/imint/iraqi-freedom-23.htm>

The **Defense Update** page on the Litening 3 Advanced Targeting Pod is here:
<http://www.defense-update.com/news/litening-sales.htm>

The **FAS.org** page on the LITENING Advanced Airborne Targeting and Navigation Pod is here:
<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/smart/litening.htm>

The Official Site for the **103rd Fighter Wing, Connecticut Air National Guard** is here:
<http://www.ctbrad.ang.af.mil/>