



Outside the Wire: Reserve lawyer's heroics aren't limited to the courtroom

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Citizen Airmen/October 2011 -- Maj. Grady "Jed" Morton is one of Air Force Reserve Command's top lawyers, but he doesn't do all of his fighting in the courtroom. On a recent deployment in Afghanistan, Morton showed he is just as effective with an M-4 rifle in his hands as he is with any law book.

For most of 2010, Morton was deployed as the in-theater rule of law attorney in the staff judge advocate's office supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

"My primary job was to help build cases and send insurgents through the Afghan criminal justice system," he said.

To help build a case, Morton would often go outside the wire with Soldiers as they conducted raids.

"Most of these missions would go off without a hitch," he said.

The one he went on June 30 was not like most missions.

"I was going along with an Army assault force conducting a raid on a suspected insurgent hideout in Helmand province," Morton said. As the assault force maneuvered toward its objective, enemy fighters attacked with machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire. While the group Morton was in suppressed the enemy positions with machine gun and mortar fire, additional assault members maneuvered and destroyed the enemy.

Morton's element then maneuvered to clear and secure a compound on the southern edge of a small village. After clearing several buildings, Morton posted as a sentinel on the western wall of the compound. From there, he observed several possible enemy fighters maneuvering toward friendly forces. On each occasion, he exercised discipline and restraint in recognizing that the rules of engagement had not been satisfied to allow him to engage these individuals.

Later, as members of the joint force moved toward their helicopter pick-up site, Morton's element was targeted by snipers firing AK-47 rifles from a tree line. While under direct enemy fire and despite a lack of available cover, Morton engaged the enemy with his M-4, suppressing the sniper attack while an effective close-air support mission was called in.

Morton and the assault force then successfully flew out of the target area while still under the imminent threat of enemy attack.

No coalition troops or civilians were killed during the six-hour raid, and the assault force killed dozens of enemy fighters and captured a high-level Taliban commander. In addition, coalition forces discovered and destroyed a huge cache of weapons and a large quantity of opium.

For his actions on that day, Morton was awarded the Air Force Combat Action Medal and the Army Combat Action Badge, an unusual honor for an Air Force member. For his overall service in Afghanistan, he received the Bronze Star.

While it might seem unusual for a staff judge advocate to be going along on ground combat operations, Morton is not your typical lawyer. An Air Force Academy graduate, Morton served for 12 years as an F-16 fighter pilot, instructor pilot and mission commander on active duty and in the Air National Guard. He flew 63 combat missions in support of Operations Desert Storm and Southern Watch.

"I really felt comfortable going along on those raids outside the fence," Morton said.

Even after feeling AK-47 rounds pass by him during the June 30 mission, he went out on several more missions with troops on the ground. He has since volunteered to deploy again.

After leaving active duty in 1997, Morton flew F-16s for three years with the Air National Guard's 163rd Fighter Squadron in Fort Wayne, Ind. He left the Guard in 2000 and took a job flying for Delta while serving in the Inactive Ready Reserve. It was during this time that Morton decided to go to law school. Today, he practices as a civil trial lawyer in Atlanta and still flies Boeing 777s for Delta.

As a Reservist, he served as the executive officer in the 908th Maintenance Group at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., from 2007 to 2009. Today, he is an assistant staff judge advocate assigned to the 42nd Air Base Wing at Maxwell. He was recently selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel and received the 2010 Harmon Award as the most outstanding judge advocate of the Reserve and Air National Guard.

"The IMA program is a great fit for me," Morton said. "I'm glad I was able to stay connected to the military through the Air Force Reserve, and I'm committed to helping the legal office at Maxwell make the best use that it can out of its Reservists."

(Editor's note: The account of Morton's role in the gun battle in Afghanistan was taken from witness statements used to award Morton the Army Combat Action Badge.)

