



## Face of Defense: Airman Drives 120 Convoys in Afghanistan

By Master Sgt. Demetrius A. Lester, USAF  
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BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan, Feb. 12, 2008 – Regardless of what job Air Force members have, being an airman comes first. And in today's Air Force, being an airman sometimes means doing a job normally performed by soldiers.

Before she went to Fort Bragg, N.C., for predeployment training, Air Force Senior Airman Vanessa Velez thought her yearlong deployment to Afghanistan would be spent maintaining vehicles.

"I was told, 'You won't be working vehicle maintenance; you will be a driver,'" she said. "At Fort Bragg, I found out I wouldn't be driving shuttles, distinguished visitors or commanders around in a car or bus like I was mistakenly told at my duty station. I would be driving a fully loaded Humvee outside the wire in enemy territory at least five times a week."

The airman said Army Lt. Col. Bobby Robinson, who would end up being her provincial reconstruction team commander, told Velez's team they would be living in tents and riding outside the wire.

"That's when reality set in," she said. "At first, I was shocked and couldn't believe that a girl from the Bronx, N.Y., was about to be a driver in a hostile situation."



*Air Force Senior Airman Vanessa Velez, a convoy driver with the Bagram Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan, poses for a photo in front of her Humvee before a mission, Feb. 10, 2008. Velez, a vehicle maintenance controller with 6th Logistics Readiness Squadron, at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla., has driven more than 120 convoys during her deployment. Photo by Master Sgt. Demetrius Lester, USAF (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.*

When she arrived in Afghanistan, Velez was assigned to the Bagram PRT, whose mission is to secure and rebuild a post-Taliban Afghanistan by extending the authority of the Afghan central government, improving security and promoting reconstruction. The PRTs have been so successful that they became the template for helping to rebuild Iraq.

“My first convoy, I was so nervous that I kept stomping the brakes until the brake line broke,” said Velez, a vehicle maintenance controller with 6th Logistics Readiness Squadron, at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. “The heat and fluid from the brake line started a fire.”

More than 120 missions later, Velez has experienced no more brake problems or fires. She continues to shuttle truck and mission commanders outside the wire on a daily basis, and said she believes she has made a difference for both America and the Afghan people during this war.

“I have learned so much about a lot of things, especially my job and the Afghan people,” she said. “I had the mentality they were all al Qaeda and Taliban until I talked to them. After spending time with the Afghans, I learned they don’t like the Taliban, either. Everything has gotten better since my arrival in March 2007. ... Even the roads have improved.”

When she’s outside the wire, Velez is somewhat of a celebrity with the Afghan children. “They get excited because they see a female airman. They want to touch my hair and earrings,” she said. “The Afghans want to learn and have a lot of questions. They want to work and take care of their families like most ordinary people (in the United States) do.”

This is Velez’s third deployment in three years, but she said she has no regrets.

“I am an airman first, just like all the services have been preaching,” she added. “This shows (that) in this day and age you could be tasked to do anything to support the war on terror.

“My job satisfaction comes from constantly thinking about all the people’s lives I have in my hands,” she continued. “My vehicle is my job. I drive so much that my Humvee is my office. I don’t have a computer, e-mail or an office. I have a Humvee.”

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