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Face of Defense: Air Force Reserve Pilot Breaks Own Aviation Record

By Air Force 1st Lt. Lisa Spilinek
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BALAD AIR BASE, Iraq, May 2, 2008 – An Air Force Reserve pilot deployed here broke his own world record for hours spent flying the F-16 Fighting Falcon when he surpassed the 6,000-hour milestone today.

Lt. Col. Michael Brill, a pilot assigned to 421st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, has been breaking world aviation records since 1993, when he surpassed the world's first pilot to fly 3,000 hours in the F-16. In August 1998, he became the first pilot to fly 4,000 hours and, in November 2002, he was the first pilot to attain 5,000 hours.

"The sustained effort required to spend 6,000 hours flying the F-16 is phenomenal," said Brig. Gen. Burton M. Field, commander of 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, of which the 421st EFS is a part. "Six thousand hours equates to 250 days in the cockpit -- not counting all the time in ground ops before and after the flight. That is an incredible amount of time in a high-G [force], high-speed, high-stress arena.

"Flying fighters is mentally and physically challenging. The environment, threat, systems, weapons and the mission set are constantly changing and require a disciplined program of study and practice to remain on the cutting edge," said the general, who graduated with the colonel in 1979 from the Air Force Academy. The two attended F-16 training together at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, in 1980.

Despite the challenges of flying the F-16 almost constantly since 1980, Brill said he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love to fly. I don't remember ever wanting to do anything else. There is a communication between me and the machine. Flying an airplane is like being on a roller coaster that you can steer," said the colonel, who grew up on various Marine Corps bases, but calls Virginia home.

Brill, who is deployed from Hill Air Force Base, likened the evolution of the missions F-16 pilots fly and the development of precision-guided weaponry to the strides that have been made with computer technology over recent decades.

"It's been a constant challenge -- nothing has stayed the same," he said. "The development of the aircraft and missions requires constant emphasis and effort to go to the books. In aviation, the precision weapons that we use now compared to those in the past are more of a revolution rather than an evolution."

Brill has personally experienced these changes while flying nearly 225 combat hours and more than 65 combat sorties. His combat experience includes three tours in support of Operation Northern Watch, two in support of Operation Southern Watch, two in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and one in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

In addition, he led the first F-16 strike into Afghanistan following Sept. 11, 2001, a 10-hour mission he described as an "eye-opening experience."

The more recent combat missions he has flown since arriving in Iraq in March have been a lot "quieter," because fewer munitions have needed to be dropped -- an indication that the global war on terrorism is being won, the colonel said.

Many of the missions flown by pilots in Iraq are reconnaissance missions, in which information is gathered using high-tech cameras to identify potential ground threats.

"Our primary mission [as flyers providing close-air support for ground units] is to make noise," he explained. "We are up there to let the bad guys know what we're capable of and to keep them hunkered down. This allows the [ground personnel] to work to establish good relationships with the people who are helping us. The impact of the air power is knowing that the airplane overhead gives people on the ground an umbrella of safety that is basically irreplaceable."

Brill's active-duty assignments have taken him to Holloman Air Force Base, N.M.; Hill Air Force Base; Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.; and Kunsan Air Base, South Korea.

In 1990, Brill became an air reserve technician, which basically is a full-time reservist position. He has been assigned to 419th Fighter Wing at Hill since then and is chief of the safety Office.

His status as a deployed reservist is an example of the Air Force's integration of personnel from all military branches -- active duty, Reserve and Air National Guard.

"The Air Force has been over here in Southwest Asia for 17 years," Field said. "To accomplish our mission, we have needed the Guard and Reserve every single day of those 17 years. They bring experience, judgment and maturity to the fight in a variety of different mission sets and you can't tell them apart from the active-duty [airmen] by their appearance, dedication, pride or job performance."

Reserve airmen do not move to new locations at the same three to four-year frequency that active-duty airmen move; their long-term presence at a base is another way reservists positively affect Air Force operations, Brill said.

"We give continuity to active-duty personnel because of our longevity in a location," he explained. "We help facilitate programs and provide cradle-to-grave support. We bring a stabilizing influence to a rapidly changing world; it's the very nature of total force integration. We are seamlessly integrated with our active-duty counterparts."

Along with program support, Brill said, he enjoys supporting another, even more precious Air Force asset: the service's newest flyers.

"The opportunity to pass along my ideas and philosophy is profound. The energy new pilots have fires me up too. It's very synergistic," he said.

Brill's record gives new flyers a goal and shows what long-term commitment can accomplish, Field noted.

"These kinds of accomplishments, achieved by sustained effort over time, give our next-generation airmen a goal to shoot for and an example to emulate," the general said. "There is opportunity in the Air Force to pursue your dreams, whether to fly fighters for 6,000 hours or to excel in the myriad of other career fields required by the Air Force to provide the air power for America."

Pilots alone cannot accomplish the Air Force's mission, Brill said.

"The fact that I've flown 6,000 hours of incident-free flying is a testament to an amazing machine and our dedicated maintenance support airmen," the colonel said. Field agreed.

"Everything we do in the Air Force is a team effort," he said. "'Brillo' has been working with a great team for years -- first while on active duty, then in the reserves, including the crew chiefs, back shops, pilots, [petroleum, oil and lubricants specialists], and the rest of the airmen we need to generate sorties and execute our mission. He shares this accomplishment with all those airmen who have been a part of every mission he has flown."

Though Brill is the only person to surpass the 6,000-flying-hour mark in an F-16, he's already looking to the future. With five years left until his retirement, he said, he doubts he'll be able to hit 7,000 flying hours, but he's willing to give it a try.

"If they want to throw that many sorties at me, I'll take them," he said. "I never say no when they ask me to fly. I love it."

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