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Zargawi Air Strike Shows Aerial Flexibility, General Says

By Jim Garamone
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, June 15, 2006 – The attack that killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi demonstrates the flexibility that air assets give commanders, officials here said today.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Stephen Hoog, an air planner with Multinational Force Iraq, gave a timeline of the operation that resulted in the death of the most wanted terrorist in Iraq June 7.

An F-16 Fighting Falcon jet dropped two precision bombs on a safe house near Baqubah, killing Zarqawi and his spiritual adviser.

Nothing indicated this day would be different from any other for Air Force pilots over the country, Hoog said. A flight of two F-16s were conducting surveillance and to detect improvised explosive devices buried in or along highways in Iraq.

The two aircraft topped off fuel from a KC-10 air-to-air tanker and controllers redirected the aircraft to support coalition operations northeast of Baghdad, Hoog said. "Soon after 6 p.m., the flight passed the location of a safe house where Zarqawi was hiding," he said.

At 6:11 p.m., one F-16 dropped one bomb on the house and scored a direct hit. Minutes later, the jet dropped another bomb on the same house and again scored another direct hit, the general said.

The F-16 did not rely on people on the ground pointing a laser at the house. Rather, the aircraft "lased" the target from the air.

The raid was successful, ending the life and career of the wanted terrorist in rubble.

The aircraft were the only coalition assets that could act on the intelligence quickly, officials said. In fact, while the bombs dropped at 6:11, the first coalition soldiers did not arrive at the site until 6:40, and that was an 11-man military training team embedded with a near-by Iraqi Army unit.

Officials speaking on background said it was the prudent thing to do to spare American lives. Rumors in Baghdad said that Zarqawi always wore a suicide vest, ready to pull the trigger if confronted by coalition soldiers.

"In fact, we did not know the state of the defenses in that house," said the official. "It would have unnecessarily put Americans at risk to send them in when you have the aerial option like that."

Adding to the decision, officials said was the fact that the house was isolated and chances of collateral damage was minimal. "We could still have done it in a city, but it would have been a much more involved decision," the official said.

The F-16s continued to fly cover over the site until relieved. It wasn't until the next day, Hoog said, that the pilot learned who was the target.

The general emphasized that the attack was a team effort. Persistent surveillance over the battlefield comes from unmanned aerial vehicles such as the Global Hawk and Predator. Hoog said satellite surveillance also helped in pinpointing the precise global positioning system coordinates for dropping the second bomb.

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