

**Forty missions over the Gulf with A-10 pilot Shanghai Sheehy.**

# To War in a Warthog

By Alfred Price

**I**N THE decade and a half leading up to the Persian Gulf War, the Air Force A-10 community worked hard to hone its skills in the difficult business of providing close air support (CAS) for ground forces. During Operation Desert Shield, seven squadrons with 144 of the ungainly attack planes went to Saudi Arabia, where they formed the 354th Tactical Fighter Wing (Provisional) based at King Fahd International Airport.

Capt. Todd "Shanghai" Sheehy of the 511th Tactical Fighter Squadron flew forty combat missions in the A-10 "Warthog." His experiences provide valuable insight into the employment of the aircraft and illustrate anew that in war one must learn to expect the unexpected.

For instance, the Warthog force was used only sparingly in the CAS role but proved more versatile and better able to survive over enemy territory than many expected. During the forty-day conflict, the A-10 force was credited with destroying 987 tanks, 926 artillery pieces, 1,355 combat vehicles, and a range of other targets—including ten fighters on the ground and two helicopters shot down in air-to-air engagements. The A-10 force, flying



*In A-10 No. 81-0964, Capt. Todd "Shanghai" Sheehy shot down an Iraqi Mi-8 "Hip" helicopter during the Persian Gulf War. The aircraft bears a little Iraqi flag to commemorate the encounter. Opposite, a "Warthog" from the 442d Fighter Wing, Richards-Gebaur AFB, Mo., flies into the sunset.*





more than 8,000 combat sorties, suffered only five A-10s destroyed (a loss rate of .062 percent). Twenty of these aircraft returned with significant battle damage, and forty-five others returned with light damage that was repaired between sorties.

Like many A-10 pilots based at King Fahd IAP, Captain Sheehy spent the first day of the war—January 17, 1991—at cockpit readiness. Some A-10s took part in the initial air strikes, but most of the Warthog force was held on the ground at readiness to counter any incursion by Iraqi troops into Saudi Arabia.

Captain Sheehy flew his first combat mission on the second day of the war. Part of the definition of the CAS mission is “an air action against hostile targets . . . in close proximity to friendly [ground] forces.” Because hostile and friendly ground forces were not then in close proximity, the A-10 force was used in a role for which it had never been intended—battlefield air interdiction missions against targets in enemy rear areas.

It was dark when Captain Sheehy and his wingman, Capt. Scott “Sparky” Johnston, walked out to their planes at 4:30 a.m. Each Warthog carried the

standard armament load: six Mk. 82 500-pound bombs with radar airburst fuses, one infrared-guided Maverick missile and another with TV guidance, two AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles for self-protection, and 1,200 rounds of ammunition for the internally mounted 30-mm cannon.

### A Rude Awakening

The pilots started their engines, and Captain Sheehy called the 511th’s operations center for his task. He was told to head for a position off the coast of Kuwait and call “Blacklist,” the Marine Direct Air Support Center, for his target assignment.

Moments later, the pilots’ calm was rudely shattered.

“I had just called the ground controller for taxi clearance,” said Captain Sheehy, “when over the Guard frequency came a broadcast ‘Alarm Red! Alarm Red! Alarm Red!’ I had already had the crew chief pull the chocks from my wheels, but none of my weapons were armed. On hearing the alarm, my crew chief unplugged from the jet, closed the ladder door, and ran for cover as he pulled on his gas mask.”

An attack on the base was imminent, but the broadcast did not state the na-

ture of the threat. The first Scud missile fired against Saudi Arabia was speeding toward nearby Dhahran, but so far as Captain Sheehy was concerned, the threat might easily have been bombers sweeping in to attack the base at low altitude. The greatest fear was a gas attack, and Captain Sheehy’s first move was to turn off his plane’s environmental control system to keep outside air out of the cockpit.

The pilot eased on power to edge the Warthog out of its revetment, but, as he pushed the rudder pedal to turn the plane, it continued straight ahead. The nosewheel steering had failed. As malfunctions go, this was minor, and he was able to steer the plane using differential application of the brakes, but it was a problem that he could have done without at that moment.

“There I was, on my first combat sortie, with a thousand thoughts running through my mind. The base was under attack. Were planes about to drop bombs, or was it a Scud missile? Would we be able to repel the attack? Would the Patriot missiles protecting our base work as advertised? There was all of that to think about, as well as the normal cockpit tasks of getting the aircraft off the airfield.





*After flying three combat sorties, Captain Sheehy briefs the next "shift" of pilots on Iraqi defenses and likely targets in Kuwait. One of those likely targets may have been the tank below, hit on the road to Basra by coalition forces.*

"To add to that, it was dark, and as a day fighter unit we did not practice a lot of night operations. I had not flown a sortie from that base at night; I had never even taxied there at night before. With an attack imminent, all lights had been turned off, and I had to use my taxi light to find my way. And my nosewheel steering didn't work. So my first combat mission was definitely not going very well."

### Getting Their Attention

Captain Sheehy reached the holding point beside the end of the runway and stopped, waiting for an arming crew to remove the safety pins from his weapons. Nobody stirred. Jiggling the throttles and the brakes, he pointed the taxi light at the arming crew's bunker and repeatedly flashed it on and off to get their attention. Eventually, he succeeded.

"It was an eerie sight when the arming guys came running out in full chemical warfare gear, gas masks, suits, gloves, boots, flak vests, and helmets. They probably set a world record for arming an A-10. Then, as quickly as they had arrived, they were back in the bunker."

Once he was airborne, Captain Sheehy looked around for his wingman's strobe light. By then, the on-alert F-15s from Al Kharj were also streaming into the air, and strobes seemed to light all over the sky.

"It was a beautiful clear night with a lot of stars," remembered Captain



Photo by Michael Longe

Sheehy. "The blinking strobe lights of the fighters blended with the stars to create the illusion of every aircraft in the coalition racing north to meet the enemy. As Sparky joined up off my left wing, my heart rate began to return to normal. Suddenly there was a large flash over my right shoulder. . . . I thought it was either a Scud impact or a Patriot intercepting a Scud [in fact, a Patriot had detonated close to the incoming Scud]. I began to worry about what my squadron mates and my air base would look like when I got back. Had the missile landed there? Did it have a chemical warhead?"

Flying over water at 22,000 feet, the raiding aircraft ran parallel to the Persian Gulf coast as the A-10s made their way to the target area. The sun was rising, revealing a fine day with clear skies below the aircraft and a thin layer of cirrus above them at about 27,000 feet. Captain Sheehy called "Blacklist" and was informed that his target was an artillery site just inland from the pier at Mina Sa'ad in Kuwait.

Captain Sheehy located the pier without difficulty, and the pilots prepared to attack with bombs. Unfortunately, the layer of cirrus above them presented a contrasting backdrop for the dark planes, and, as Captain Sheehy acquired his target, the Iraqi anti-aircraft gunners acquired the Warthogs. As the planes headed toward the coast, the leader's attention was diverted by an urgent call from his wingman.

### Heavy Puffies

"He called, 'Heavy puffies [anti-aircraft artillery rounds exploding] below us!'" said Captain Sheehy. "They were big white balls with dark gray centers. We figured they were 57-mm rounds, and they could reach us at our altitude. We could see the muzzle flashes, and the guns were right on the coast, between us and our target. We tried to come in from different directions, but the flak followed us. Putting our noses down that chute with those gunners watching us just didn't seem like the smart thing to do."

Captain Sheehy moved to what appeared to be a safe distance from the



coast and tried to lock a Maverick missile on to a target, but there was insufficient image contrast to use the weapon. As if to emphasize the point that things could turn sour at any moment, his wingman gave a sudden "Break right!" call to avoid an upcoming SAM. Captain Sheehy did as he was told, punching out chaff and decoy flares.

"As I looked out the side of the canopy," said the A-10 pilot, "I saw a glowing orange ball with a long white smoke trail streaking toward me from the pier. I rolled out to put the missile off my right wing and kept the flares coming. I was greatly relieved to see the missile moving aft across my canopy, which meant that it was not guiding on me any longer. The smoke trail abruptly stopped, and I watched the missile fall into the Gulf."

Captain Sheehy moved further from the coast and pondered what to do next. The A-10s were starting to run low on fuel. Captain Sheehy called "Blacklist" and informed the controller that he had been unable to hit the assigned target. He said he was returning to base and hoped to be back later. When the pair reached King Fahd IAP, Captain Sheehy was delighted to find that his earlier worries about the attack on the base were unfounded.

"The base was still there, and, in the light of day, everything was fine," he remembered, "but I still had no nosewheel steering. So after I landed, I turned off the runway and stopped.



**Captain Sheehy is still flying A-10s, now with the 75th Fighter Squadron, 23d Wing, Pope AFB, N. C. The Warthog (whose official nickname is Thunderbolt II) has come into its own in the close air support role during the past decade.**

At the end of my first combat sortie, my plane was towed back to the parking ramp with all the bombs and missiles still loaded—not exactly what I had planned."

Later that morning Captain Sheehy took off in another A-10. He and Captain Johnston returned to their original target and took advantage of the higher sun to deliver a quick, accurate attack, apparently unobserved by enemy gunners.

Captain Sheehy's next twenty-four sorties were against Iraqi artillery po-

sitions and vehicles situated well back from the border. On his twenty-seventh combat sortie, on February 15, 1991, he led Lt. Jay Keller from the forward operating base at Al Jouf. The A-10s were briefed to go to a point a few miles from Mudaysis Airfield in southwest Iraq, where enemy planes had been found hidden in revetments in the desert. Captain Sheehy destroyed an Su-20 "Fitter" with cluster bombs and cannon fire and headed away from the area, climbing back to 20,000 feet.

As he did so, he heard the controller in the E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft trying to contact some A-10s that had departed the area. Captain Sheehy told the controller that he and his wingman were available, and he was informed of a low and slow contact thirty miles to the northeast. Captain Sheehy started in that direction and commenced a shallow descent. Soon afterward, the A-10 pilot saw a small cloud of dust and a dark object moving across the desert. Leaving Lieutenant Keller above to cover his attack, Captain Sheehy rolled inverted and pulled into a forty-five-degree dive.

### Hip Shot

"As I got closer, I identified it as an Mi-8 'Hip' helicopter moving fairly quickly, very low to the desert floor," said Captain Sheehy. "I took aim and started shooting at about 8,000 feet, firing about 300 rounds of 30-mm. As I recovered from the dive and circled



**The men of Captain Sheehy's Desert Storm unit, the 511th Tactical Fighter Squadron "Vultures," pose after the war with the aircraft of their commander, Lt. Col. Mike O'Connor, who designed his plane's nose art.**





***It may be ugly, but the A-10 is a welcome sight to ground troops in a tight spot. In the Gulf War, Warthogs performed little CAS but shone in interdiction, proving more versatile and surviving better over enemy territory than many expected.***

back around, I observed that the helicopter appeared to be smoking. Jay radioed that it looked like some of the bullets impacted the tail section. I rolled back into the dive [and] fired about 200 more rounds into the Hip, bottoming out of the dive at about 4,500 feet."

As Captain Sheehy climbed away, he glanced back and saw a cloud of black smoke rising from a new fire on the ground. That marked the point where the helicopter had gone down.

The ground war opened on February 24, 1991, and Captain Sheehy went into action in the CAS role on February 26. He and Captain Johnston were scrambled to assist US Marines moving on Kuwait City and under fire from enemy artillery. There were also reports of Iraqi tanks moving against them. As the Warthogs neared the battle area, they had to descend to 5,000 feet to keep below the "petroleum overcast," the layer of thick black smoke from burning Kuwaiti oil wells.

"Visibility decreased to about three miles, and, even though it was midday, under the clouds it was more like dusk," said Captain Sheehy. "The scene below us was amazing: thousands of coalition vehicles in columns moving north. We could even see the corridors that had been cut through the barbed wire barriers and minefields as the columns bottled up at these chokepoints before moving northward again. Our guys were definitely on the offensive."

Captain Sheehy made contact with the pilot of the F/A-18 airborne for-

ward air control (FAC) plane, who briefed him on the whereabouts of the Iraqi artillery and AAA defenses.

The A-10s were handed to the ground FAC to get final clearance to attack. It took the latter several minutes to transmit the exact positions of friendly forces in the area to Captain Sheehy, but that was an essential part of the operation. The fundamental axiom of the CAS mission is "Better to kill no targets at all than risk accidental hits on friendly forces." Captain Sheehy was then directed to the offending enemy artillery positions and given clearance to attack.

"I moved our orbit further north until I could see the muzzle flashes from the self-propelled artillery vehicles that were pounding our guys' positions. I directed Sparky to a trail formation, and we set up our switches to deliver Mavericks. I rolled into a shallow dive and locked on to one of the revetted artillery vehicles with an IR Maverick."

This Iraqi weapon had already fired several rounds, and on the TV monitor in the A-10 cockpit the vehicle appeared white-hot—a perfect target for an IR missile. Captain Sheehy launched the Maverick from three miles and

turned away. After it made impact, he observed several large secondary explosions around the revetment. Captain Johnston delivered a similar attack on another of the Iraqi guns. The A-10s pulled clear and orbited while the FAC assessed the situation.

"He reported good hits and said the artillery barrage had stopped," said Captain Sheehy. "Sparky and I moved closer and observed operators of the guns abandoning their vehicles and running south. I reported this to the FAC, and he directed us to turn our attention to the tanks reported moving south down the coastal highway. We found and identified the tanks and quickly dispatched the lead two with TV Mavericks.

"Fuel was getting low, and the FAC had a set of AV-8B Harriers waiting, so we safed up our armament switches and pressed back to King Fahd. The FAC had kind words for us as we departed, saying that teams were rounding up prisoners who had abandoned the artillery."

That was the last time Todd Sheehy went into action and the only time he did so in the CAS role. During his remaining missions, he flew to the battle area, orbited, and returned with all his ordnance. By then the coalition forces were advancing so rapidly that the FACs usually refused to clear attacks because of the risk of hitting friendly forces. Captain Sheehy never had to put the A-10's ruggedness to the test, for his aircraft never took a hit of any kind.

The slow-flying A-10 was never designed to go deep into enemy territory to seek out targets. Because its primary CAS mission was denied it for most of the conflict, interdiction made up the bulk of its sorties. Still, no military person would assert that every future conflict can be so well controlled. The A-10 is surely among the ugliest planes ever built, but, to a platoon of grunts cut off, pinned down, and taking losses, one of the most beautiful sights in the world is the approach of a pair of Warthogs with full ordnance and fuel for forty-five minutes on task. The *most* beautiful sight is six pairs. ■

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