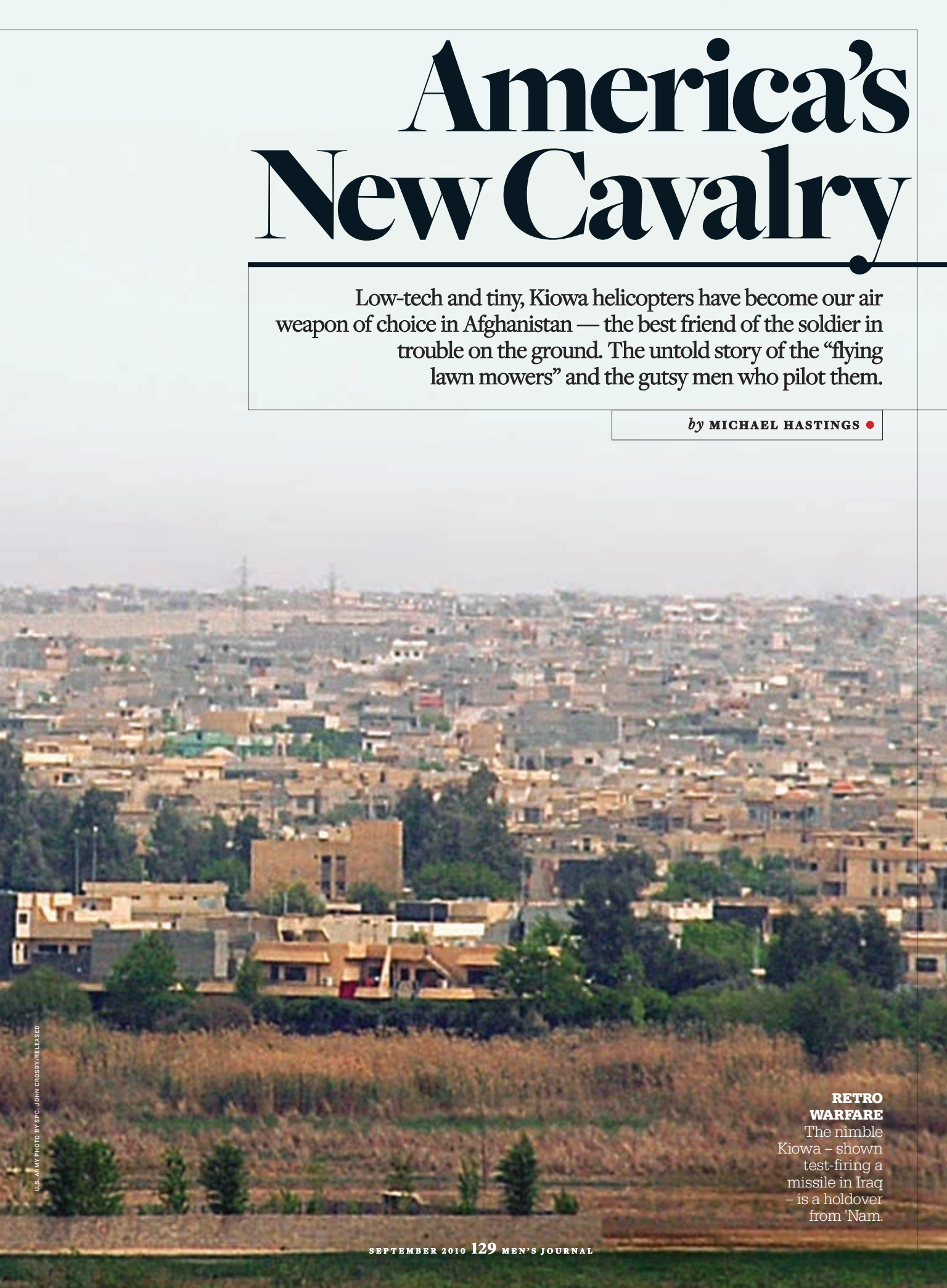
America's New Cavalry

Low-tech and tiny, Kiowa helicopters have become our air weapon of choice in Afghanistan — the best friend of the soldier in trouble on the ground. The untold story of the "flying lawn mowers" and the gutsy men who pilot them.

by MICHAEL HASTINGS



U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. JOHN CROSBY/RELEASED

RETRO WARFARE The nimble Kiowa – shown test-firing a missile in Iraq – is a holdover from 'Nam.

BULLET MAGNETS Pilots returning to base after one of their frequent, often dicey patrols in Kandahar

THE AMBUSH BEGAN AT 8 IN THE MORNING, as rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire shook the dirt at the small outpost on the Pakistani border. Taliban fighters had taken up positions on the mountainside overnight, sneaking in on a path known for ferrying suicide bombers into Afghanistan. I crouched behind a row of sandbags, 100 yards from an Afghan soldier who'd spent the previous night smoking hash. He was now shooting a PKM machine gun, laughing wildly while wearing only flip-flops, boxers, and a ripped T-shirt. Nearby, the infantry platoon of 20 Americans I was embedded with were firing their own weapons at boulders and cave openings, trying to hit an enemy they couldn't see.

The soldiers tried to call in artillery support, but because they couldn't pinpoint where the firing was coming from, their request was denied. It was another dicey shit fight on some worthless hill in Afghanistan: American troops under attack, wondering if this would be the time the Taliban would get the upper hand.

That's when I heard a *thwump-thwump-thwumping* — the distinctive sound of rotor blades. I looked over my shoulder, and two small helicopters were cutting high across the horizon. It seemed as if they were floating over the mountaintop, pausing like a pair of deranged hummingbirds ready to dart to the ground. They came in hot — the first one swooped directly overhead, strafing the mountainside with .50-caliber fire; the second let loose with four rockets. With each boom, the Americans on the ground let out a hoot — enjoying a brief

photographs by
LUCIAN READ

MAN WITH A PLAN
Banshee troop commander Stephen Irving delivers the pre-mission briefing.

respite from the fighting to watch the fireworks show.

The Kiowas came around for a second pass. The whole strike took maybe three or four minutes, but when it was finished, there was no more firing coming from those mountains. The insurgents had either been killed or run away. Either way the Kiowas had put a quick end to the threat.

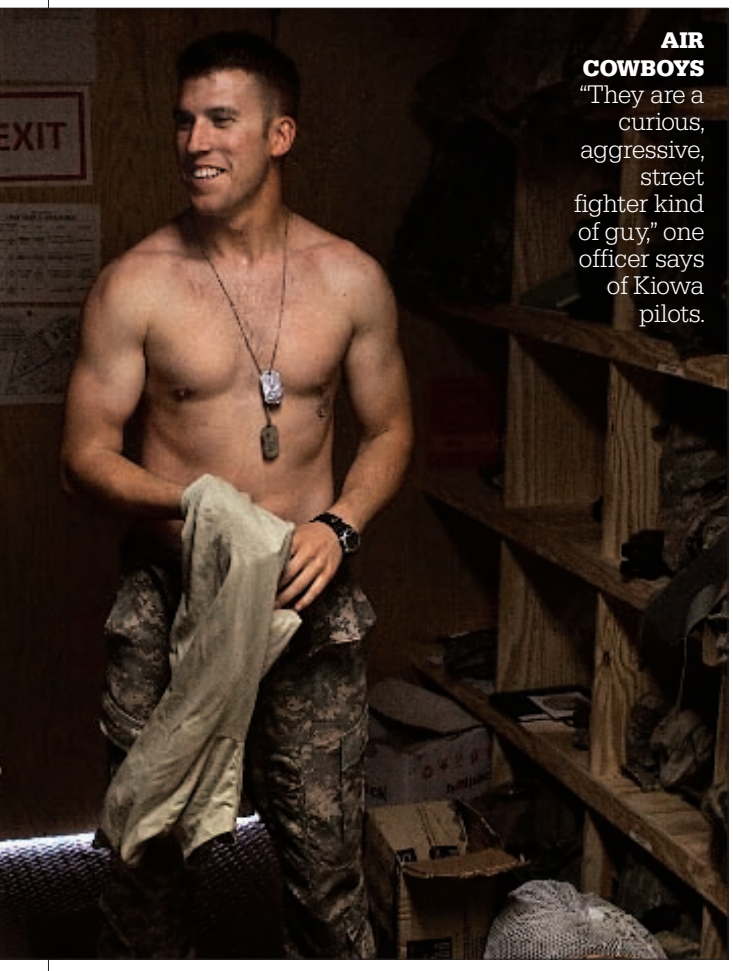
This wasn't my first encounter with the helicopters officially known as OH-58 Kiowa Warriors — just the most harrowing. During the five years I'd spent covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I had often seen these tiny birds, each about the size of a Suburban, flying around. They aren't nearly as pimped out as the $32 million Apaches or as intimidating to look at as the workhorse-like Black Hawks. But they are wonders of precision, buzzing the landscape at less than 50 feet or zipping in and out of canyons and mountain passes like lethal mosquitoes. On more than one occasion while working in Baghdad, I had watched from my balcony as the Kiowas got scary-close while circling the hotel — probably providing security for a VIP or escorting a ground patrol.

It's this agility that has made the Kiowas and their ballsy pilots arguably the most vital air weapons of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. America's counterinsurgency strategy, erected on the notion that the best way to fight terrorism is by nation building in these countries, has put an emphasis on limiting civilian deaths and property damage. In this kind of war — one with no traditional fronts, no columns of tanks to take out, but instead groups of insurgents holed up in populated areas or craggy mountainsides — precision trumps brute force. That has translated into a significant scaling back on the use of artillery and "fast mover" aircraft like fighter jets and the more deadly Apache helicopters, which can fire from miles away.

With their ability to get in close to the enemy, the Kiowas, nearly discarded remnants from the Vietnam War, have emerged as America's modern-day cavalry. Not only are these nimble helicopters particularly useful in spotting roadside bombs — the number one killer of U.S. troops — they are one of the last high-powered weapons infantrymen can call on to bail them out when taking fire. "They pack a pretty good punch and are reasonably precise," says John Pike, a military analyst at GlobalSecurity.org. "If you were dealing with the Soviet Union, a 15-megaton bomb would suffice. But in Afghanistan, where you are fighting smaller enemy units hiding in villages, you need an aircraft like the Kiowa."

And you need a special kind of pilot — one willing to wage low-altitude gunfights on an almost daily basis. "Our job is to put ourselves between the infantry and the enemy," explains Chief Warrant Officer and Kiowa pilot Krystian McKeown. "If we aren't getting shot at, we're not doing our job."

Even other pilots have a begrudging respect for the cowboys who fly Kiowas. "We're thinking they're crazy," says one Apache pilot. "They fly so low, sometimes 10 feet off the ground." Or, as Lt. Col. Scott Rauer, Kiowa product manager in Huntsville, Alabama, puts it: "They are a curious, aggressive, street fighter kind of guy. They are down there, eyeball-to-eyeball with the infantry."



AIR COWBOYS "They are a curious, aggressive, street fighter kind of guy," one officer says of Kiowa pilots.

GUARDIAN ANGEL A Kiowa (middle of photo) circles above an Army convoy that had been ambushed shortly before. The chopper was called in to fend off the attackers.

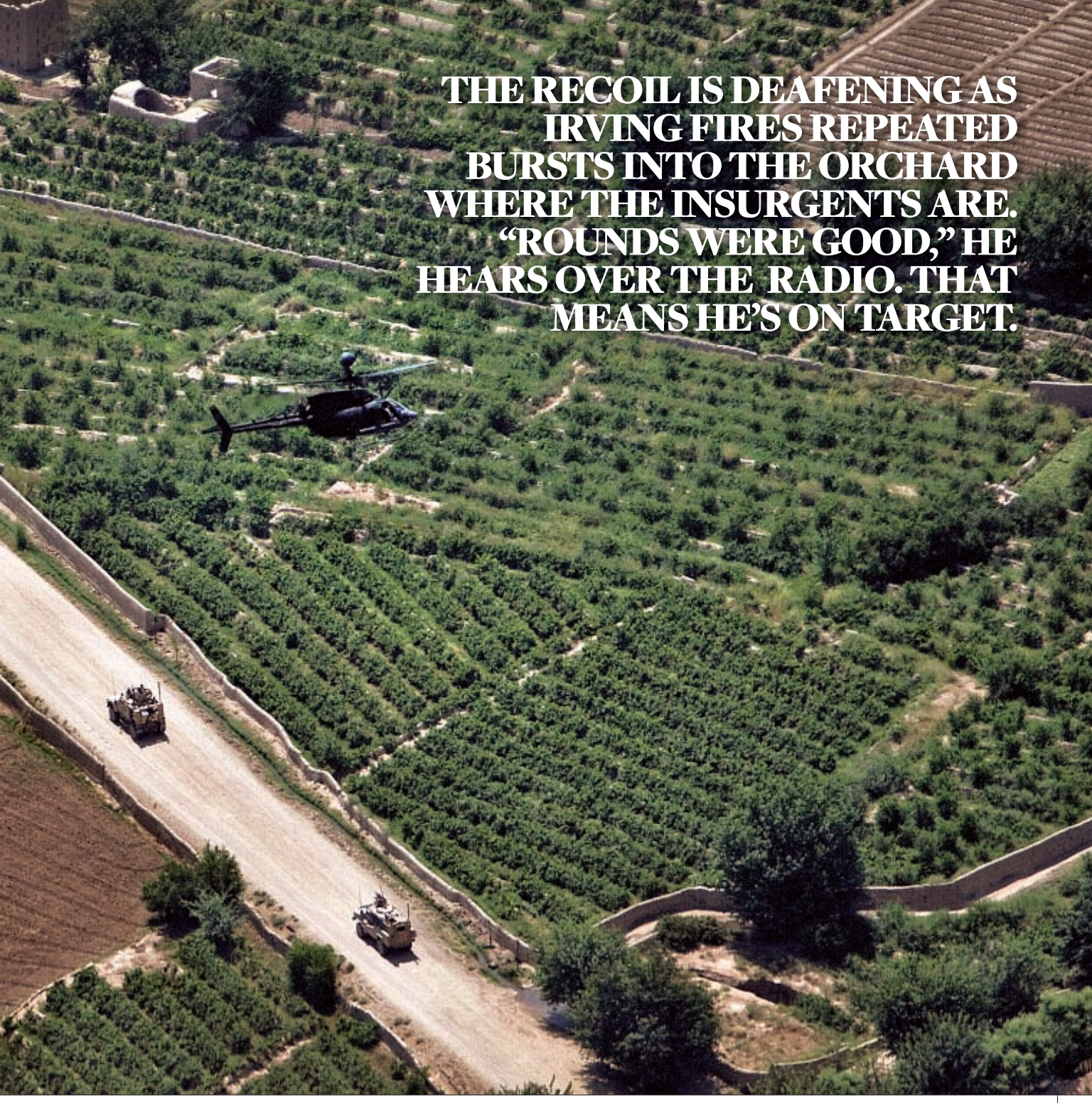
Not surprisingly, flying a Kiowa is one of the most dangerous assignments of the war. According to U.S. Army stats, the Kiowa has the second highest crash rate among Army aircraft (the Apache is first). At least 35 Kiowas have been lost in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is a combination of reasons for that: It has a single engine (with no backup), it routinely flies low (well within range of RPGs, AK-47s, and telephone wires), and the very nature of its missions brings it to wherever the action is. It is the most-used Army aircraft in the recent wars, logging some 600,000 hours of combat since 2001.

For the infantry who rely on them, they are a godsend. "The Kiowas are an amazing asset for us ground pounders," says Staff Sergeant Joe Biggs, who has served three combat tours and was with me on that mountainside on the border of Pakistan in October 2008. "They have saved my ass on numerous occasions."

My younger brother knows exactly what Biggs is talking about. He was an infantry platoon leader in Iraq, and during one fight in the Sunni Triangle, at the height of the surge in June 2007, his unit was taking heavy fire on the roof of a building as 30 Al Qaeda insurgents began to encircle them from below. That's when he called in the Kiowas. Arriving within 10 minutes, they decimated the enemy forces. "When you see those pilots in Afghanistan," my brother told me, "tell them I say thanks."

IT'S 3:30 IN THE MORNING, AND CAPTAIN STEPHEN Irving is beginning his commute to work. Here at Kandahar Airfield, the pilot barracks — container-like white boxes that pass for apartments — are on the opposite side of the complex from the airfield itself, some five miles away. Irving, a Kiowa pilot, is joined by five other pilots in a white minivan, crawling slowly along the bumpy road. Very slowly. There's a 20-kilometer-per-hour speed limit on base, and it's well-enforced. The temperature has dropped to a bearable 75 degrees; early morning is the only civilized time of day in Kandahar. Floodlights and kicked-up dust lend the black sky an eerie pinkish tint, giving the base the feel of an empty fairground after the carnies have cleared out.

Irving, commander of Banshee troop in the 2-17 Cavalry Regiment of the 101st Airborne, will lead today's mission: a routine patrol to check for roadside bombs, scout enemy movements, and be on call in case ground troops come under attack. The 34-year-old father of two from Hopkinsville, Kentucky, is about as straight-arrow as they come. He doesn't even swear, which is an incredible feat in this environment where *fucks* and *shits* and *motherfucking cocksuckers* pass for



THE RECOIL IS DEAFENING AS IRVING FIRES REPEATED BURSTS INTO THE ORCHARD WHERE THE INSURGENTS ARE. "ROUNDS WERE GOOD," HE HEARS OVER THE RADIO. THAT MEANS HE'S ON TARGET.

transitional verbs. He's on his third combat tour — one in Iraq, two in Afghanistan — and like a number of the Kiowa pilots, he started in the infantry before deciding there were better ways to travel during wartime. "For us it's a way of life now," he says. "I have more memories of doing this than of my life back home."

Once they arrive at the airfield, he and his co-pilot today, Chief Warrant Officer Josh Price, walk out to their Kiowa, parked in a spot protected on three sides by concrete blast walls. Price has dubbed their bird "Gertrude." The mission is still five hours away, but the two go through their pre-flight rituals. Irving cocks his pistol and puts it in his side holster, then he and Price load up their M4 carbines with tracer rounds and strap them to the dash — not as a last resort in case they wreck, but because sometimes, at close range, they'll lean out the door and take aim at the Taliban. ("Some of these guys have confirmed kills just shooting the M4," a helicopter mechanic tells me.)

At a glance, the Kiowa looks like something a traffic reporter might use. With only two seats and one engine, it is tiny. The fuel load alone of an Apache is half the weight of one Kiowa. The armor plating is frighteningly thin, and the cockpit is so cramped, especially with the pilots' bulky body armor and helmets, that you wouldn't be able to fit even a suitcase behind their heads. The inside of the bird is straight out of a '70s action flick: lots of buttons and switches, a far cry from the glitzy electronic dashes in most modern aircraft.

The fact that the Kiowas have far fewer automatic piloting functions than the Apaches and Black Hawks is actually a point of pride. "I tell the other pilots we're the only ones who fly our aircraft anymore,"

"I LIVE FOR THE ADRENALINE" Pilot Jeremy Woehlert, who has had several brushes with death; the troop HQ (right).

says Kiowa pilot Captain Chaz Allen. "The rest of them are just pushing buttons." (Those pilots good-naturedly fire back, referring to the Kiowas as "flying lawn mowers." During his flight school, Allen recalls, the instructor showed a picture of the sexy Apache blasting a Hellfire missile and a Black Hawk gloriously swooping over water. For the Kiowa, he flashed a picture of a radio-operated whirlybird.)

Irving climbs up on the helicopter to look at the "mast-mounted site" — the distinctive big round ball sticking out at the top that adds to the helicopter's insect-like appearance. The most high-tech contraption on the aircraft, it's used for thermal imaging and daytime video monitoring, but even that function doesn't look that special — a green-screen monitor reminiscent of an Atari game. In this terrain Irving tells me that he prefers to simply use binoculars.

With all the high-tech, superexpensive weapons at America's disposal (think Predator drones and F-18s), it's ironic that the military has turned to such low-tech (and relatively cheap, with a price tag of $10 million to $12 million) machinery. In fact, the Kiowa wasn't even created as an attack vehicle. It was introduced in Vietnam in 1969 as a scout helicopter, choosing targets for other aircraft. In 1991 it was given a better weapons system to increase its attack capabilities, but it was still seen primarily as a scout. Over the years, the military has flirted with scrapping the Kiowa a couple of times, including as recently as 2008. But instead the Army decided to embrace its combat potential, updating the .50-caliber machine gun to make it more accurate, and the helicopter can now handle up to four Hellfire missiles.

Other than that, though, it's still essentially the same machine that first flew over the jungles of the Mekong Delta. In fact, the last new U.S. Kiowa rolled off the assembly line in 1989, making the youngest bird in the fleet 21 years old. The average age of a Kiowa airframe is 39. "We'd be talking to Vietnam veterans," says Captain Clint "Birdman" Hooker, "and it's amazing how much being a Cav pilot hasn't changed a bit."

Neither have the kinds of guys who fly the Kiowas. When I first arrived at Kandahar Airfield, a number of pilots told me I needed to speak with Chief Warrant Officer Jeremy Woehlert. Woehlert, it seems, is a legend in the unit for his daredevil flying and his many brushes with death. He is 35 and on his fourth tour. It was on his second tour that Woehlert had his closest call. In Mosul, in northern Iraq, he was flying at about 20 feet off the rooftops when he ran into some power lines. He lost his tail rotor and landed hard, triggering the Kiowa's airbag. He and his co-pilot grabbed their rifles and waited for a Special Forces unit to show up. It was the longest 20 minutes of his life. "I was lucky it was an election day, and no one was around, because we were in a bad part of town," Woehlert says. He describes his third tour — up in Jalalabad in Afghanistan — as him being a "bullet magnet." On one occasion, after launching a rocket into a cave, he heard the ping of a bullet hitting metal. When he got back to base, he saw that the bullet had missed him by about a foot and cut through the cables powering the instrument panel.

In June, just two weeks before I arrived, Woehlert found himself in a major battle. He shot up a grape hut from which insurgents had fired at him, and when he looked back, he saw some 20 other enemy positions nearby opening up on him. "It was like the Fourth of July or some kind of laser show," he says. "I wanted to go back over and shoot — I don't like getting shot at without shooting back — but then reality kicked in: Don't do it, dumbass."

Only a few months into his fourth tour, Woehlert is already planning to sign up for a fifth. How does his wife back home in Tennessee feel about that? "She's the one who encouraged me to join the helicopters," he says. "She's real good with it. I tell her every time I get shot at." He worries that he might have a tough time adjusting to normal life once the war ends. It's hard for him to imagine a future without flying. "I live for that adrenaline," he says.

Woehlert is not the only one in the troop who has had close calls. One 20-something pilot on his second tour has already crashed four times. The week before I arrived, another pilot had crashed after kicking up too much dust — called a brownout — and was now walking around with a bandage on his nose. There are so many ways to crash — brownouts, hitting power lines, getting shot at from above by insurgents hiding in the mountains, getting shot at by insurgents hiding in the thick grape fields, excessive heat (the aircraft doesn't work well once the air gets too hot), bad weather, a grueling schedule leading to mechanical failure — it's no wonder that some 35 Kiowa pilots have died during the current campaigns.

Because the Kiowas fly so close to the ground, Irving tells me, they are often used to gauge enemy and friendly areas, based on the reaction of the Afghans. Friendlies wave and smile, while hostiles throw rocks and show the bottom of the soles of their feet, an insult in the Muslim world. In fact, swooping in so low, so loudly, the Kiowas tend to freak the shit out of the Taliban. Irving and Price witnessed that in June when they were called in to aid an Afghan base that was being overrun. A car bomb had breached the gate, and two suicide bombers, following up on foot, tried to rush through. But when one of the bombers heard Price buzz in overhead in his Kiowa, he "paused and looked up," Price recalls. Likely fearing he would get shot, the insurgent detonated his bomb prematurely, his body evaporating into what Price describes as "a pink mist."

At 6:45 AM, LT. COL. HANK TAYLOR, THE SQUADron commander, stands in front of a map of the surrounding area and goes over today's mission: Two Kiowas will scout for improvised explosive devices along Highway 1, which leads to Kandahar City, and will be available in case any American or Afghan troops need them. It's a garden-variety patrol, but for them that usually means getting shot at. A Black Hawk will follow with what is essentially a well-armed

search and rescue team, in case they're needed, and I'll be in a second Black Hawk, so that I can observe the Kiowas on their mission — an unprecedented civilian look at them in action.

Taylor is about 6-foot-5, thick, and what folks in the military call a hard-charger. "Do your normal business," he tells the eight pilots gathered in the room. "Be safe. This is a combat zone out there, and there are people trying to shoot us down every day."

Taylor passes the brief over to Irving to get into the specifics. The briefing lasts 30 minutes, though years of information and training are compressed into shorthand and jargon, making the gist nearly indecipherable to an outsider. Here's how Irving begins, verbatim: "Twenty-three June, scouts weapons, two, UH-60, 0800 to 1300, QRF at the back end. Risk assessment? You signed? Maps? Primarily one change, call sign Hard Luck Two Three One. I have one of the new pilot packs, with new call signs, briefs, pod locations. Anybody tired? No. TAC charge. No change to that. No change to the EGI bridges, weight point loads, current as two-zero June. NVGS, should have them, spare batters. Camera. PCI on the camera. Data card, battery. Task work, lead scout aircraft nine-nine-six parked on Foxtrot One Long Knife One Two. Config is rocket-rocket."

In other words, they're ready to fly. Two hours later, the Kiowas are in the air, about 100 feet above Highway 1, checking out a few places where they think insurgents might place IEDs. We are a few hundred feet above the Kiowas, watching as they bob up and down, zipping above telephone poles, following the road, every few minutes hovering to get a closer look at a car, or a gathering of people. After about 20 minutes of this, the birds turn east, away from the villages and into the mountains, swooping over terrain that's straight out of *Star Wars* — endless blood-colored meridian dunes, steep cliffs, rocky mountain faces. Soon the Kiowas take turns letting off rounds of both the rocket and .50-caliber into the craggy mountainside.

"They're doing a test fire," the squadron commander Taylor, who is inside the Black Hawk with me, explains over the radio headset. "They need to make sure their weapons are in working order."

We head back to base for refueling, then continue west, over the city of Kandahar and its outskirts: brick factories and farmlands of thick grape fields.

It's been about an hour since we first took off, and nothing has happened. I'm hot and tired and start to think this is just a dog and pony show. My head droops and my eyes close. I start to doze off.

"Troops in contact," Taylor suddenly yells over the radio.

I startle awake, dropping my pen. It rolls back under the Black Hawk seat.

Along Highway 1, connecting Kandahar to Kabul, a patrol of American soldiers have been ambushed. Irving and Price, flying the tail Kiowa, peel off in that direction, followed closely by the second Kiowa. Information about the enemy comes in over the radio: They are well-armed, with machine guns and RPGs.

Irving is about five minutes from the scene, but as he'll explain to me later, he is already thinking tactically: What is the best way to arrive without giving away his position? Usually it's flying very low to make it harder for him to be seen and heard from a distance, then popping up at the last second, because once the Kiowas are spotted, the insurgents usually flee. Two minutes out, Irving raises the ground troops on the radio. They tell him that they've pinned down the Taliban in an orchard, but they are still taking heavy fire.

Irving's mind is racing. Where will the friendlies be? What about the Taliban? How can he best take them out — or, as he puts it, "maximize ballistic effect"?

In the trailing Black Hawk with me, Taylor points to a puff of red smoke rising up. The soldiers on the ground have tossed a can of smoke to mark the Taliban.

"Five to eight insurgents, small arms and RPG," he says.

Since the soldiers have dismounted, Irving and Price have to be careful not to shoot at them by mistake.

FLYING A KIOWA IS ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS ASSIGNMENTS OF THE WAR. SOME 35 KIOWA PILOTS HAVE DIED IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN.

Another pop of smoke, this time yellow. "My position is the yellow smoke," the ground unit, call sign Warthog, calls over the radio.

The two Kiowas dive down for a look at their target. Their goal is to "engage and destroy" the enemy, or if that proves impossible, to lay down enough suppressive fire so that the patrol can move on. Price has picked out the orchard where the insurgents are believed to be hiding. Irving grasps the control stick, moving the button to the right, switching from rockets to his .50-cal.

He speaks calmly over the radio. "Friendlies 1 o'clock low.... Tally friendlies.... Turning left.... Enemy in sight. Roger in sight. Roger clear to engage...."

He presses the trigger. The recoil is deafening, bone-shudderingly loud as he fires repeated short bursts into the orchard. The Kiowa literally shakes inside, as does Irving's jaw. "Rounds were good, good effect," he hears over the radio from the infantry commander on the ground. That means he's on target, and he didn't hit any friendlies.

The insurgents have stopped attacking. For about five more minutes, the Kiowas stick around, making sure the American patrol can continue on.

"Two insurgents confirmed KIA" from the Kiowa fire, Taylor tells me. "Scout weapons team two engaged, disrupted the enemy. That's busy. Those friendly patrols are out there every day, and that's our primary mission. To allow them to do *their* mission."

The ground commander radios up to Irving: Thanks.

"Hey, man, my pleasure. You guys deserve the thanks for doing the hard work," he responds.

We return to base. Total flight time for Irving and Price: six and a half hours. They are drenched in sweat. During the course of the mission they drank nine 12-ounce bottles of water each. A few of the pilots on the mission go back to the barracks and later play a round of *Call of Duty 4*, while Irving heads to his office to do paperwork.

I ask Irving how he feels when he returns from a mission like that. "It's usually not until after the fight has died down and the tracers and RPGs stop flying that you actually get a chance to reflect on what just happened and how dangerous it really all was," he says. "I've found myself often thinking, Wow, that was a little intense. Those guys were trying to kill me."

His time to reflect doesn't last long. Insurgent rockets hit the airfield later that afternoon — no one is killed or injured, but one of the missions for the Kiowas in the days ahead will be to find out where those rockets are coming from. In all, most of the pilots will have to fly 120 to 160 missions over the course of their yearlong tour. That translates to about 600 hours, or 25 living days, in the air as flying targets. The Kiowas, too, will continue to take a beating, which is why in April the Army announced a new program to give the birds better sensors, updated cockpit displays, and 21st-century software. About the only things that won't get rewired are the badasses who fly them. And for the troops on the ground, that's all the better.