

RAF bombing campaign is fiercest since Iraq invasion

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The RAF has unveiled its largest bombing campaign since the invasion of Iraq as British forces try to turn the tide in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Figures obtained by The Sunday Telegraph show that the RAF unleashed nearly 500 bombs and rockets on Taliban positions in September in support of British troops on the ground. Commanders say they are preparing to launch a new offensive to drive insurgents out of Helmand.

Pilots of the seven Harrier jump jets based in the neighbouring province of Kandahar have likened the fast-moving conditions to the Battle of Britain as they scramble to launch mission after mission in support of their Army colleagues.

advertisement Senior officers say the scale of the campaign gives the lie to accusations that the RAF had been "utterly, utterly useless" in Afghanistan.

In an email leaked last month, Major James Loden, of 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, claimed the Air Force was unable to identify targets and had on one occasion strafed a British position. "The RAF have been utterly, utterly useless," he wrote.

In reply, RAF pilots flying the Harriers of IV Squadron in Afghanistan described Major Loden as "ridiculous, ill-informed and uneducated".

"The young major wrote his email in early August before our operations ramped up so if we were so 'utterly, utterly useless' as he says then the Paras would not have continued calling us up to help them," one said.

Wing Commander Ian Duguid, who commands the squadron, said the email controversy had caused a "devastating dent" in morale but crews had put it behind them. "We've had a cracking war," he said. Speaking exclusively to The Sunday Telegraph, the pilots described how they had flown mission after mission in support of the troops on the ground.

The air strikes in the north of Helmand and during Operation Medusa near Kandahar are said by Nato to have inflicted "several hundred" casualties on the Taliban. "Each day we were launching three waves and a night wave, as well as having two aircraft on ground alert 24 hours a day ready to launch," said Wg Cdr Duguid. "My pilots usually fly two times a day and they sometimes fly more."

One of Major Loden's accusations was that "a female Harrier pilot 'couldn't identify the target', fired two phosphorus rockets that just missed our own compound so that we thought they were incoming rocket-propelled grenades, and then strafed our perimeter, missing the enemy by 200 yards".

The pilots said they were sometimes frustrated by the confusion on the ground, which complicated the business of selecting a target. One pilot returning from a mission to help Afghan Army troops complained that the Taliban had dressed up in Afghan police uniforms and with both sides wearing the same uniforms, the Harriers had to return to base with their weapons still on board. "There was nothing I could do," he said.

The air campaign is the RAF's largest bombing operation since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In Helmand alone, 3 Para called for 160 air strikes in August, 100 of them against Taliban fighters

threatening to overrun soldiers besieged in the town of Musa Qalah. The Harriers' next task in southern Afghanistan is to drive the Taliban away from the main towns of central Helmand.

The RAF also has eight Chinook helicopters and five C-130 transport planes in Afghanistan. The Army has eight Apache helicopter gunships and four Lynx helicopters.

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