

The CONDOR



Official Magazine of the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, Camp Taji, Iraq April 2011



THE MISSION BEGINS

*Preparation meets opportunity
for the 40th CAB*

MASCAL EX-EVAL

68WHISKEY'S train as they fight

DEPLOYED TOGETHER

Family members meet up on the battlefield

THE GIFT THAT FOOTBALL GAVE

Apaches fly helmet over Iraqi skies

editor's letter



1st Lt. Jason Sweeney
Editor-in-Chief
The CONDOR Magazine



The Condor Magazine has taken flight!

The 40th Combat Aviation Brigade's Public Affairs Office is proud to bring you the first edition of ***The Condor***—your publication in which we hope to tell your stories. With more than 3,000 Soldiers in Task Force Condor from National Guard, Army Reserve and active-duty Army units from 22 states, there are plenty of stories to tell.

In this issue, read about a break during training at Fort Hood which led to a special gift from a high school football player; a Kiowa pilot who took out improvised rockets near Contingency Operating Base (COB) Warhorse; brothers stationed together at COB Speicher who are continuing a family tradition of National Guard service—read all about it here in your Brigade magazine.

Task Force Condor is in Iraq during a critical time for the Iraqi people as they transition to democracy after decades of suffering under dictatorship and war. The Brigade is playing a key role during this historic transition by providing security and freedom of movement across the country.

The Soldiers of Task Force Condor have been doing outstanding work since beginning the mission here a little over a month ago. Thousands of personnel and hundreds of thousands of pounds of equipment have been transported to destinations across Iraq, countless flight hours have been logged, and extremists have been engaged and suppressed.

The role of ***The Condor Magazine*** is to highlight the great things our Soldiers are doing. There are more stories to be told!

To tell your stories, we need your help. If you are an aspiring writer or photographer, contact the staff at ***The Condor*** and show us your work, or just let us know what's going on in your unit and we'll be there. We are looking for those stories that five to 10 years down the road, or maybe even 50 years or more, people will read and think, "So that's how it was. That's what they did."

We plan to showcase Soldiers from each of the Brigade's battalions each month of the deployment. So shoot us an email or give us a call.

1st Lt. JASON SWEENEY



ON THE COVER

Photographer: Pfc. Shamsuddin "Chase" Muhammad
1-204th Aviation Company

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor-in-Chief

1st Lt. Jason Sweeney

Staff Writers

1st Lt. Jason Sweeney
Spc. Darriel Swatts
Spc. Matthew Wright

Contributors

Staff Sgt. Michael Appleby
Capt. R.L. "Ed" Edwards
Spc. Michael Uribe

Photographers

Spc. Darriel Swatts
Spc. Matthew Wright
Staff Sgt. Yvonne Najera
Pfc. Shamsuddin Muhammad
Staff Sgt. Michael Appleby
Capt. R.L. "Ed" Edwards
Spc. Michael Uribe

Art Direction & Layout

Staff Sgt. Yvonne Najera

Publishing

Toledo Knights, Iraq

SUBMISSIONS

Send your photos to:

yvonne.najera@iraq.centcom.mil

Send your stories to:

jason.b.sweeney@iraq.centcom.mil

40th Combat Aviation Briagde

Public Affairs Office

CAMP TAJI, Iraq

Building 121A

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318-834-4152

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Commander's letter



Col. Mitch Medigovich
40th Combat Aviation Brigade

the 40th CAB.

It was a symbolic moment, when preparation met opportunity. We trained long and hard for this moment, and hit the ground running.

Prior to our arrival in Iraq, Soldiers were perhaps a little anxious; but, now on the ground, they are confidently carrying out the mission and doing great.

Not too long after our arrival, the mail started flowing in. We are all very thankful for the many letters and packages we have received, and look forward to continued correspondence with our friends, family, loved ones and supporters back home. The support we have received from various organizations—Defenders of America, Adopt-A-Platoon and many others, has been amazing and for this we are very grateful.

Now, as we are in our second full month in country, the first of our Soldiers are beginning to depart on some very well deserved Rest and Relaxation (R&R) leave. We are all looking forward to a break and spending some quality time with our

March 6 was a historic day for the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade. It was the day of our Transfer of Authority Ceremony (TOA), when leaders from across the Iraqi Joint Operating Area (IJOA) witnessed the transfer of authority of the U.S. Army aviation mission in Iraq from the 1st CAB to

friends and families over the next several months.

We are proud to be here in Iraq serving during this remarkable time for both of our countries, as operations in Iraq draw to a close eight years after they began back in March of 2003. During Operation New Dawn, the drawdown of troops and equipment continues, as does the transfer of responsibility for the IJOA to the Government of Iraq and Iraqi Security Forces.

We remain fully committed to supporting the warfighter. Since our TOA, we have been involved daily in a multitude of operations that directly and indirectly support coalition forces.

Around the clock we stand ready to provide MEDEVAC support and response to troops in contact. We continuously have aircraft in the sky providing route security for troops moving throughout the IJOA, providing force protection by vigilantly patrolling the airspace around our Forward Operating Bases, and of course by moving troops and equipment throughout the country.

Whether they are involved in the actual flying, essential maintenance, logistical and administrative work or manning one of our many Tactical Operating Centers, our Soldiers are working tirelessly to ensure these operations are conducted with the utmost professionalism. I could not more proud or more appreciative of the efforts of each and every one of these Soldiers.

Looking forward, we will continue to provide world class aviation support throughout the IJOA with the same laser focus, hard work and dedication to the mission at hand that are the very essence of the Soldiers of the 40th CAB!

"Wings of the Sun"

Mitch Medigovich
Condor 6





Command Sgt. Maj.'s letter

It's been a month since the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade—Task Force Condor—assumed responsibility for theater aviation operations. What a busy month it has been!

After all the preparation and training, we finally completed our long journey and hit the ground in Iraq. We familiarized ourselves with the new environment, took over operations and got into our own battle rhythm. It's said that the first couple of weeks of a mission are always the hardest. I agree with that. I must tell you how proud I am of the way we have all worked together and pulled through.

One of the best parts of my job is traveling to various locations to speak to the Soldiers of our Brigade. In my travels, I have found morale to be genuinely positive, and I still have a few other locations to visit. Talking with leaders and Soldiers, listening to them go into detail about their jobs, listening to the excitement in their voices—it's personally very inspiring.

With my many years of service, I have heard Soldiers give various reasons for joining the Army. Some of the most common: for a job, for family reasons, for schooling or education, to make a new start, or, what personally strikes me most, "I wanted to be part of something larger than myself."

When Soldiers speak, I can tell they love what they do. From being a human resource specialist, an aircraft refueler, an aircraft mechanic, any number of computer specialist jobs, or pilots—all support our mission. Mostly, though, Soldiers are taking care of each other and making a difference in the world.

The Soldiers of the 40th CAB are work-

ing hard to accomplish the mission, but you might ask, what have they been up to in their off time? This varies from base to base, but activities include: visits to the Post Exchange, Morale Welfare and Recreation facilities, gyms, religious services, or playing computer



CSM David McFerrin
40th Combat Aviation Brigade

games in their CHUs. Other recreational options include: weightlifting competitions, softball, basketball, soccer, amateur Karaoke night, movie nights and long runs on the base. Camp Taji and Joint Base Balad even have swimming pools. These activities and facilities give us a chance to relax or blow off steam. When the mission allows, take advantage of what's offered here.

Although we have some amenities, we mustn't forget that we are still in warzone. We are far away from family and friends and the workload is heavy. Keep an eye on your battle buddy and keep your head in the effort.

Our service supports the people of Iraq, and honors all that have served here before us to secure the United States from the threat of terrorism.

Stay Positive, Stay Sharp, Stay Safe! And Stay Army Strong. Hooah!

David McFerrin

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// This is a historic time and the challenges we face this year will be unlike any other rotation before us. //

CAB TAKES THE REINS

Story by 1st Lt. Jason Sweeney, Photo by Spc. Darriel Swatts

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – It's official. The skies of Iraq now belong to the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade.

Under a bright Iraqi sun, a Transfer of Authority (TOA) ceremony formalized the start of the 40th CAB's yearlong mission: To provide full-spectrum aviation operations in Iraq.

The 40th CAB—call sign Task Force Condor—took over operations from the 1st CAB, which has returned home to Fort Riley, Kan. after successfully completing its yearlong tour.

On March 6, Col. Frank Muth and Command Sgt. Maj. James Thomson cased the 1st CAB's colors at a courtyard ceremony in front of the brigade Tactical Operations Center at Camp Taji.

The 40th CAB's commander, Col. Mitchell Medigovich, and Command Sgt. Maj. David McFerrin then uncased their brigade colors as Soldiers from both brigades, several general officers and Iraqi distinguished guests looked on.

"This is a historic time and the challenges we will face this year will be unlike any other rotation before us," Medigovich said.

The 40th CAB assumed command during a critical year in Iraq. American forces are drawing down as the Government of Iraq and Iraqi Security Forces take responsibility for security here.

In November, the 40th CAB was mobilized and sent to Fort Hood, Texas where it conducted two months of intense pre-deployment training. Its Soldiers arrived in theater in February, taking responsibility for all Army aviation missions in Iraq—from medical evacuations to transportation of high-profile visitors to force protection,

and more.

The 40th CAB is a unique collection of five battalions from the National Guard, Army Reserve and active-duty Army, with elements from 22 states. The brigade's headquarters company is a California Army National Guard unit from Fresno.

Each of the battalions that make up the CAB had their own TOA ceremonies the first week of March. On March 1, the Army Reserve's 8-229th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion from Fort Knox, Ky. assumed command at Camp Taji. On March 3, the Georgia National Guard's 1-171st General Support Aviation Battalion assumed command, also at Camp Taji. On March 4, the Mississippi National Guard's 1-185th Aviation Helicopter Battalion assumed command at Contingency Operating Base Speicher. The same day, the California Army National Guard's 640th Aviation Support Battalion from Los Alamitos, Calif. assumed command at Camp Taji. And on March 5, the active-duty Army's 6-17th Cavalry Squadron from Fort Wainwright, Alaska assumed command in Mosul.

Medigovich commands an organization made up of more than 3,000 Soldiers and 200 aircraft, to include UH-60 Black Hawks, AH-64 Apaches, OH-58 Kiowas, CH-47 Chinooks, as well as fixed wing assets, such as the MQ-1C Gray Eagle unmanned aerial system.

At the final TOA on March 6 in front of 40th CAB's headquarters building, Medigovich stood before the brigade's colors and its blue and gold sunburst crest and took the reins from Muth.

"The preparation is over," Medigovich said. "It's time to get to work."★





Story and Photos by Spc. Matthew Wright

68 WHIS

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – Vehicles pulled up and Soldiers poured out of the Troop Medical Clinic here. The Soldiers carried stretchers, medical bags and bright orange cases containing oxygen tanks to a group of simulated casualties who were bloodied and screaming.

The “casualties” were put on the stretchers and moved with urgency to the foyer outside the clinic.

This was a mass casualty exercise, yet the medics who represented the 40th Combat Air Brigade performed their mission as if it were real. Using the foyer as a triage area, they lined up the simulated casualties by injury severity.

During the exercise in March, they treated those that could be taken care of on the spot and then moved more seriously injured patients into the treatment centers for

the surgeons and the physician assistants to work on. Once stabilized, victims that needed surgery and more in-depth treatment were lined up to be airlifted by medical evacuation helicopters.

This was not the only mass casualty exercise for this crew at the Taji Troop Medical Clinic (TMC). There was a “mascal” exercise the month prior.

These exercises gave the medics on Camp Taji a chance to test their performance and their ability to work in sync at their highest levels and as a cohesive unit in one of the most critical aspects of their jobs.

Sgt. Christian Lopez from the 640th Aviation Support Battalion’s headquarters company said having multiple exercises helps improve staff cohesion. “I learned that we are a very good team,” Lopez said. “We progressed a lot from the first exercise that we did,” he



KEY-LIFE SAVERS

added. "Today we did a lot better."

In preparation for a real world event, each medical Soldier has a specific task, which enables the team to accommodate a large number of patients at once.

Capt. Blair Heath, the officer in charge of the Taji TMC, said, "This is a new unit that came in, so we tasked them with specific jobs that they would do in this situation. ... They know what to do and where to go."

Preparation for a mass casualty event takes a lot of teamwork and communication so that medical personnel understand their roles in that event, he explained. Their skills are also very important to the stabilization of the casualties.

Afterward, the staff critiqued its performance to see what was done right and what could be improved. The medics overall said they were pleased with how they responded, how they

worked together to improve their performance from their previous exercise, and that the lessons learned will be applied to their next event. ★





It's Three Deployments and Counting

Story by 1st Lt. Jason Sweeney

Photos by Spc. Darriel Swatts

CAMP BUEHRING, Kuwait—Chief Warrant Officer 5 Richard Huber was driving across a desolate Kuwaiti desert in February when he noticed that the number 20 was displayed on numerous banners that lined the roadside.

His companion told him that the banners were part of a national celebration to commemorate the Feb. 26, 1991 liberation of Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War.

"That's when the light bulb went off," Huber said. "I'm here for the 20th anniversary and I was here for the liberation."

Like many Soldiers in theater for Operation New Dawn, this is not Huber's first rodeo.

The Iraq War entered its eighth year on March 20 and Soldiers with multiple deployments here are commonplace.

But for some Soldiers, such as Huber, their first combat patches were earned in the region long before Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

The Persian Gulf War

Huber has vivid memories of being a 22-year-old helicopter pilot sent to fly the hostile skies of Iraq during the Persian Gulf War—a full 12 years before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

At that time, Huber was a young Warrant Officer 1 trained to fight Soviet tank divisions if they invaded West Germany through the Fulda Gap.

Instead, it was Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard that invaded Kuwait, and Huber found himself flying his EH-60 Black Hawk electronic warfare helicopter over unfamiliar desert terrain where sand and dust played havoc with his aircraft and illumination at night fell to nearly zero, reducing the effectiveness of his night vision goggles.

"There were a lot of unknowns then," Huber said. "We didn't know what we were up against, how we were going to fight. We didn't know how long

we were going to be gone. This was a completely different ballgame for us and there were a lot of things to learn as we went."

In February 1991, coalition forces advanced from Saudi Arabia into Iraq and then made a right turn into Kuwait, cutting off fleeing Iraqi

forces. Huber's helicopter witnessed the action from above, intercepting radio transmissions from the Iraqi leadership.

The war quickly turned into a rout as Iraqi forces surrendered en masse or fled for their lives out of Kuwait.

Three Kuwaitis were riding along in Huber's Black Hawk monitoring radio intercepts for military intelligence analysts. The US government had recruited the Kuwaitis from American colleges to serve as interpreters.

"Right at the end when they said the war was over and Kuwait City had been liberated, we were in the western edge of Kuwait," Huber recalled. "The interpreters heard on the radio

// Thank God we're out of here and we'll never have to fly in this place again. I've had to eat my words twice now. //

that the conflict was over and the three guys that we had with us put their M-16s down and started walking across the desert to Kuwait City. It took us a while



to convince them to come back, that it would be a few days, but we would get them into Kuwait City. They had families there so they wanted to go to them."

With Kuwait liberated, coalition forces halted their advance and pulled out of Iraq.

"I remember when we were leaving Kuwait in 1991; we landed at the port where the helicopter blades would be folded back before the aircraft would be loaded onto a ship bound back to Germany. We landed, and I looked over at my co-pilot and said, 'Thank God we're out of here and we'll never have to fly in this place again.' I've had to eat my words twice now."

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Huber left the Army in 2000 and turned his attention to the restaurant business, becoming a part-owner of three restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area.

After three years of busing tables, bartending, covering costs and making payroll, he realized that he would rather be flying.

"The restaurant business wasn't for me," he said. "I was not doing what I wanted to do. I've always wanted to fly, so I went back to aviation."

In 2004, he rejoined the military, flying helicopters one weekend a month and two weeks a year for the Cali-

fornia Army National Guard.

In September of that year, he was called up to deploy to Iraq with the California Army National Guard's 1-140th Aviation Battalion based out of Los Alamitos, Calif.

Nearly 15 years after the end of the Persian Gulf War, he again found himself in the Middle East, this time at Forward Operating Base Speicher near the city of Tikrit, flying the skies of Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Unlike the Persian Gulf War, which was full of unknowns for Huber, Operation Iraqi Freedom became about routines.

"We had a set pattern of what the mission was, what our jobs were and where we would be flying," he said. "We fell into an ongoing mission and pretty much knew what we had to do once we got there."

As a maintenance test pilot for the unit, he got plenty of flying time.

"I was probably doing three troubleshooting test flights a day," Huber recalled. "I'd get in an aircraft, check it out, go fly it, bring it back, sign it off, release it, go to the next aircraft, figure out what was wrong with it, pre-flight it, go fly it, bring it back, close it out. It was a lot of short flights in a short amount of time."

In 2005, Huber returned from Iraq unscathed and took a job as a civilian test pilot for the Aeroflightdynamics Directorate at Moffett Field in Mountain View, Calif. When not at work, he spent time at home in San Jose with his young son and daughter from a previous marriage while continuing to attend National Guard drills one weekend a month.

In May 2010, he married his sweetheart Lianne shortly before he was called up to return to the Middle East in support of Operation New Dawn.

Operation New Dawn

On Nov. 28, 2010, the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) was mobilized for a yearlong tour in Iraq.

The 40th CAB is made up of units from the National Guard, Army Reserve and active-duty Army, with elements from 22 states, all led by a California Army National Guard headquarters company based out of Fresno, Calif. The CAB has been tasked to perform "full-spectrum aviation operations" in the skies of Iraq for much of 2011—performing all manner of aviation missions, from evacuating sick and wounded personnel to transporting high-level government officials to force protection.

Huber, now a Chief War-rant Officer 5, is a maintenance test pilot for the CAB and serves as the Brigade Aviation Maintenance Officer—a job that entails overseeing the maintenance of the brigade's helicopters and ensuring that the aircraft have the parts they need to stay in the air.

With about 200 helicopters and 3,600 personnel spread across Iraq, the CAB has a big job during a critical year in the country—a year that could close the book on the war in Iraq.

American forces in Iraq have fallen from a high of about 170,000 in 2007 to fewer than 50,000 now. If current trends continue, nearly all American military forces could be out of Iraq by December, leaving only a handful of advisors.

Depending on how events unfold over the next several months, the 40th CAB could be one of the last American units in the country.

For several weeks in February, Huber lived in a tent city at Camp Buerhing, Kuwait, 15 miles from the Iraqi border, shuttling to and from the camp and Kuwaiti ports to supervise

Story continued pg 27

FOOTBALL STAR SHINES

Story and Photos by Staff Sgt. Michael Appleby
HHC, 8-229th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion



In January shortly before the Apache battalion departed Fort Hood, Texas for Iraq, Command Sgt. Maj. Sammy Sablan led a group of noncommissioned officers and junior enlisted Soldiers on a mission: Attend the U.S. Army All-American Bowl at the Alamodome.

The trip to the game was a chance for a little rest and relaxation for the Soldiers, who had just completed three months of rigorous pre-deployment training and evaluations. The U.S. Army All-American Bowl is sponsored by the U.S. Army and features 90 of the best high school football players and 125 of the top high school marching band members in an East meets West matchup.

The Soldiers of the 8-229 watched a close match with a final score of East 13, West 10.

At the end of the game, the players on the East team gathered on the field to celebrate

story continued pg 27

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – Soldiers from the 8th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 229th Aviation Regiment stationed in Iraq are carrying a special gift—the prized football helmet of one of America's top high school linemen.

Landon Turner, a 6-foot-5, 310-pound offensive guard from Harrisonburg, Va., presented his helmet to members of the battalion at the U.S. Army All-American Bowl at the Alamodome in San Antonio in January.

The helmet made its way from Texas to Camp Taji, Iraq where it will remain until the unit returns home in late 2011.

The 8-229 ARB is an AH-64 Apache Longbow unit from Fort Knox, Ky. The battalion is the attack arm of the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, which has been tasked to perform full-spectrum aviation operations in Iraq this year.





High school lineman Landon Turner holds his helmet which displays the patch that Soldiers of 8th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 229th Aviation Regiment are wearing on their uniforms in Iraq.

CAB HERO of the Week

Story by Spc. Matthew Wright

Photo by 6-17th CAV



Chief Warrant Officer Chase Magann of A "Aces" Troop, 6th Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment from Fort Wainwright, Alaska.

// I made another attack run on a steeper angle hoping to dislodge the rockets from their dirt mound. **//**

CONTINGENCY OPERATING BASE WARHORSE, Iraq – Two OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters were conducting patrols in Diyala province on Feb. 23 when they received a “threat to forces” call.

Improvised rockets had been fired at Contingency Operating Base (COB) Warhorse. The fast-flying Kiowas made haste to the reported location of the threat.

Chief Warrant Officer Chase Magann was piloting the lead aircraft with copilot Chief Warrant Officer Mike Walton. Capt. Seth Power and Chief Warrant Officer Travis Prohaska were in the trail aircraft. The crews and their aircraft belong to A “Aces” Troop, 6th Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment from Fort Wainwright, Alaska. The 6-17 CAV is an attack and reconnaissance element attached to the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade.

The two patrolling helicopters searched the threat area. “My left-seater, (Walton) thought he saw rockets in the tree line,” recalled Magann, an Easton, Pa. native. “When he called it out, we came back around at a slow airspeed and a low altitude to confirm the rockets were emplaced.”

They spotted five improvised rocket launchers embedded in a dirt mound, with rockets still on the rails.

Magann and Walton saw the rockets pointing toward friendly forces. After consulting with a ground unit, the aircraft crews decided it would take too much time for the ground unit to arrive on the scene.

Magann aimed his aircraft at the rocket site and on his initial pass fired two 2.75-inch rockets. He hit his target, setting off a secondary explosion.

On his second pass, he saw two rockets still undamaged and went in to finish them off.

“I made another attack run on a steeper angle hoping to dislodge the rockets from their dirt mound,” Magann said.

After his second pass, Power and Prohaska in the trail aircraft determined that the improvised rockets were no longer a threat, Magann said. The Kiowas remained overhead and walked the ground unit to the site. An Explosive Ordinance Disposal team then recovered some unexploded ordinance.

Magann said a few concerns ran through his mind during the engagement. “To be honest, I was afraid of not hitting the rockets and wasting ammo on this target,” he said. “Another concern was if we shot these rockets, would we set them off and hurt the people we were trying to protect. ... We really attempted to not harm any Iraqis in our engagement methods and it worked so that no one was hurt.”

Magann’s actions and quick thinking have been noticed. “(Magann is) a great individual and a very driven trooper,” said Capt. Phillip Vaughn, commander of “Aces” Troop. “(He) always can be counted on to get the job done.”

In recognition of his actions, Magann was named “Ironhorse Soldier of the Week,” an award presented by the 4th Infantry Division. As a recipient of the award, he received a three-day pass at Freedom Rest North, which is a resort facility in Iraq where Soldiers can relax. Magann was also treated to dinner by the Division’s top leaders at the Commanding General’s mess. To top it off, he received an “Ironhorse” Bayonet, the Commanding General’s two-star note, a Certificate of Achievement, a flag flown in his honor at his headquarters building, and a 4th Infantry Division coin.

The award was presented to him by 4th Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. David Perkins in the main dining facility foyer at COB Speicher the first week of April. ★



Story and Photos by Spc. Darriel Swatts

SWO ON

JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq – A pilot sits in his UH-60 Black Hawk on the airfield at Joint Base Balad and calls in for a preflight weather check. The Staff Weather Officer (SWO) tells him there is a dust storm in route and there will be zero visibility at Camp Taji and that flying there is not recommended.

The pilot heeds the SWO's warning and goes into a holding area until the weather clears; possibly saving not only his own life, but the lives of his crew and passengers.

Several Airmen from the California Air National Guard are deployed to Iraq to support the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade and other air and ground assets in the country.

"The Army needs to know what's going on with the weather throughout its area of operations," said Master Sgt. Hilario Flores, SWO for the 22nd Expeditionary Weather Squadron (EWXS), Detachment Two, 163rd Reconnaissance Wing/210th Weather Flight out of March Air Reserve Base, Calif. The unit is currently deployed to Camp Taji and Joint Base Balad in support of Operation New

Dawn. "If something pops up, we have to let them know immediately so they can adjust fire accordingly and go from there."

The weather plays a big factor in military operations, both in the air and on the ground. From when a mission starts to when it is finished, the weather may change two or more times. A change in the weather can make a smooth operation grind to a screeching halt in a matter of seconds.

"The weather here in Iraq can change drastically in an instant," said Flores. "We always have to stay vigilant when we're at our post and we're always on our toes looking to ensure our forecasts stay accurate."

The 22nd EWXS uses an array of ways to gather its information to be able to accurately forecast the weather.

"We use satellite imagery and live feeds, we have automated sensors out at different locations that gather information, we send people up to the roof every hour to physically look at and feel the weather; plus, we use intel that we get from Soldiers out in the field, among other ways to gather



Maj. Jeffrey Johnson checks a TMQ-53 Weather Observation Station on top of a building at Camp Taji, Iraq.

OPERATES

our information to accurately forecast the weather," said Maj. Jeffrey Johnson, SWO officer in charge for the 22nd EWXS. "We by no means have a lack of intel to forecast the weather accurately up to four to seven days in advance."

Along with accurate forecasting, the 22nd EWXS is efficient in letting the troops know what to expect and when to expect it when it comes to the weather.

"We brief the pilots before takeoff, during takeoff, when they're in route and before they land on the most current, up-to-date weather conditions in their area," said Master Sgt. Carlos Coronado, SWO noncommissioned officer in charge, 22nd EWXS. "We also brief the command on what is going on and what's about to happen so they can disseminate it to the troops."

The Airmen of 22nd EWXS said they take pride in their mission: to provide accurate weather forecasts, visibility reports and temperature predictions to the pilots, commanders and to the everyday Soldier on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. ★



The GRAY EAGLE GETS LETHAL

Story & Photos by 1st Lt. Jason Sweeney

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – The MQ-1C Gray Eagle looks less like an eagle and more like a giant robotic insect.

Its alien-like head and dragonfly form give it a futuristic look. Appropriate enough since this unmanned aerial system (UAS) is expected to play a big role in the future of Army aviation.

Currently, four Gray Eagles are based in Camp Taji, Iraq. The airframes belong to Quick Reaction Capability 1-Replacement 1 (QRC1-R1)—a company-size unit attached to the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB).

QRC1-R1 falls under the 8th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 229th Aviation Regiment, which is the 40th CAB's attack arm. The unit's Gray Eagles perform a role similar to Apache and Kiowa helicopters, providing aerial recon-

naissance and surveillance. And after a successful Hellfire missile test shoot in February, the Gray Eagles now give commanders in Iraq a deadly new weapon in the fight against extremists.

In February, the Gray Eagle operators of QRC1-R1 gave a demonstration of the lethality of their airframe by firing six Hellfire missiles into the abandoned hulks of light military tactical vehicles positioned at Shadow Range in western Iraq. The targets were blasted with six direct hits, providing proof of the accuracy and effectiveness of the Gray Eagle in a combat environment.

When the final missile was fired during the shoot, the Gray Eagle got some help from its little brother, the Shadow UAS, which is a drone far smaller than the Gray Eagle. A

Shadow from the 4th Advise and Assist Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division out of Al-Asad was flying nearby and laser designated the target. So two Army unmanned aerial platforms performed a cooperative engagement—a first for the Army.

Sgt. Brent Randal is a Gray Eagle operator who participated in the test shoot. "In essence, it's a video game—a very expensive video game," he said of flying the Gray Eagle. "The difference is you actually have guys' lives in your hands, whether it's finding IEDs (improvised explosive devices) on the road or engaging targets in support of ground troops."

QRC1-R1 operators fly their aircraft from air conditioned portable shelters where two operators sit side by side monitoring video feeds in real time while following the Gray Eagle on maps on their



screens.

"It thinks for itself," UAS safety officer Chief Warrant Officer James Bouchard said. "It basically flies its own algorithms."

"I can click on a point on the map and the aircraft will make a B-line for it," said Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Bearden, QRC1-R1 standardization officer.

Although the Gray Eagle had previously fired Hellfire missiles in Afghanistan, the February test shoot was the first time weapons had been fired from the airframe in Iraq.

"This gives commanders the confidence that we can successfully engage a target," Bouchard said.

The Gray Eagles have been at Camp Taji since June 2010, but had been flying unarmed. Their high-

tech surveillance capabilities have been employed to find weapons caches and IEDs, and they've been used to locate and designate targets for other aircraft, as well as walk ground units in on targets.

Ground units are able to monitor video feeds from the Gray Eagle on laptops in their Humvees. The airframe also serves as a communications platform, boosting the signal strength and range of ground-based radios.

The Gray Eagle is manufactured by General Atomics. It is cheaper to purchase and maintain than a helicopter and it can stay in the air for longer stretches of time. Essentially, the Gray Eagle is the latest version of the Predator series of drones, retooled and upgraded for Army-specific needs.

The Air Force's Preda-

tor drones are flown by officers who are usually located back in the USA and connected to the airframes by satellite link. But flying the Army's Gray Eagle is an enlisted Soldier's affair, done in theater and close to the ground troops that the airframe serves.

"The Gray Eagle allows commanders to see through the fog of war and helps them command and control the battle," said Capt. Mike Goodwin, a Black Hawk helicopter pilot and commander of QRC1-R1. "You don't have to be a certified pilot to fly it. The aircraft is very autonomous."

Goodwin said the Gray Eagle has a big future. The Army is gearing up to supply all its combat aviation brigades with 12 Gray Eagles apiece.

"It's the latest and greatest," Goodwin said. ★





THE CONDOR EXPRESS

Story & Photos by Spc. Darriel Swatts

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – Safer and more expedient troop movement is a priority for commanders on the battlefield. The 40th Combat Aviation Brigade's Lightning/Condor Express provides just that.

The Lightning/Condor Express is very much like a public transportation system, but with helicopters, and in a combat zone. When Soldiers need to get from "Point A" to "Point B," they simply log onto a secure on-line network and "book a ticket" on helicopters that fly to posts across Iraq daily.

The introduction of the Lightning/Condor Express to the Iraqi airspace has greatly reduced the headache of moving troops and other assets.

"The nice thing about the Express routes is it's easy to use," said Capt. John Allen, Air Mission Request (AMR) officer in charge, 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB). "Almost everybody affiliated with the US Government can

use it to 'book' flights around the country."

The Lightning/Condor Express is used by more than 2,000 troops weekly. Prior to the Express being created a couple rotations ago, Soldiers or their commanders had to submit an Air Mission Request (AMR) and get it approved, or the Soldier

// Soldiers that use the Express are much safer flying than they would be if they took a convoy on the ground. //

could wait around the airfield and try to hop onto one of the outgoing flights with available seats.

"Our section used to receive an average of 200-plus

AMRs a day," said Spc. Lindsey Dillman, AMR processor, 40th CAB. "But now that number is greatly reduced, allowing us to focus on the higher profile AMRs."

What used to be up to a 2-3 day process of booking a flight through the AMR process is now reduced to just a couple of minutes.

"The everyday Soldier can go on-line and see what flights are available," stated Spc. Jason Frost, AMR processor, 40th CAB. "They can also see when they are leaving; plus, they can book the flight themselves. An-

other advantage to the Express is that it helps get our people off the roads, making traveling within the country safer."

The same routes that are used for troop movement also



work out great for moving equipment.

"The Express on a monthly basis moves approximately 20,000 pounds of equipment," said Capt. Edward Bombita, AMR assistant officer in charge, 40th CAB. "Since arriving here a couple weeks ago, I've noticed without the Express routes, life would be chaotic."

Safe transportation is what the Lightning/Condor Express excels at.

"Soldiers that use the Express are much safer flying than they would be if they took a convoy on the ground," said Chief Warrant Officer 5 Chris Trautwein, brigade safety officer, 40th CAB. "The chances of something going wrong in the air are much lower than a problem happening on the road; for instance, in the air, one doesn't have to worry about keeping an eye out for IEDs (improvised explosive devices). Plus it is a much faster way to travel." ★





Sgt. Scott Smira (left) and his brother Kevin.



Brothers in Arms Way

Story and Photos by Capt. R.L. "Ed" Edwards
1-185th Assault Helicopter Battalion

CONTINGENCY OPERATING BASE SPEICHER, Iraq – One or two stoplights, a Methodist church, a Baptist church, and Gentry's—a combination full-service gas station and small restaurant that serves hamburgers and milkshakes. This is the world that Scott and Kevin Smira, two brothers from Florence, Miss., grew up in.

"Dad would always take us for a free milkshake if we hit a homerun," Kevin Smira said. "Of course, we were always watching the other kids get the free milkshake," he added with a grin.

Although their world has changed from those simple days playing baseball and growing up in a small Mississippi town, the patriotism

instilled deep within these two men has not.

Two prior generations of "Citizen Soldiers" in the family ensure that patriotism is kept alive by these two sons of the South.

Both men speak with deep pride when they mention their grandfather; a man who retired from the U.S. Navy and then put in almost 20 years as a technician with the Mississippi Air National Guard. They also speak with that same pride about their father; a man who also was with the Mississippi Air National Guard for over 25 years.

Scott Smira is a sergeant and aircraft engine mechanic in the Mississippi Army National Guard's 1st Assault Helicopter Battalion, 185th Aviation Regiment—called Task Force Griffin—which is currently deployed to Contingency



Sgt. Scott Smira (right) shares a laugh with his brother, Kevin Smira.

Operating Base (COB) Speicher, Iraq.

Back home, Scott spends time with his wife Trish and sons Jacob and Matthew, and works as a technician with the Mississippi Army National Guard in Jackson. In Iraq, he's the lead mechanic in his section, spending his time repairing Black Hawk helicopter engines.

His brother Kevin is a technical sergeant in the Kansas Air National Guard, having reenlisted last week. Kevin is not deployed to Iraq as a Guardsman on this trip. This time, Kevin is in Iraq as a civilian contractor.

Kevin is Hawker-Beechcraft's project manager for the Joint Primary Aircraft Training System (JPATS) at COB Speicher. His employer is responsible for training Iraqi Air Force instructor pilots.

Back home, Kevin is called dad by Madelaine, Lizzy, Lee and Peyton. Kevin's wife, Amanda, has moved the family back to Mississippi to be closer to family while Kevin is away.

Although serving in different capacities this deployment, Scott and Kevin have deployed before. Kevin has deployed to Iraq twice and Scott has deployed to Kosovo.

Both men are now part of Operation New Dawn and both said they believe in what they are doing. Their battalion is attached to the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, which is conducting full-spectrum aviation operations in Iraq during a critical drawdown year in the country.

Kevin arrived on COB Speicher first, in late January. Scott arrived in February with Task Force Griffin.



Sgt. Maj. Willie Ross (left), and his cousins; brothers Sgt. Scott Smira (center), and Kevin Smira.

"It was nice to see my brother when I got here," Scott said. "Of course, since he has a car, I got him to take me to the PX to get stuff for my CHU (containerized housing unit). Kevin still takes me and his best friend from growing up, Sgt. Edward Raymond, to the main dining facility a couple of times a week."

Kevin's face turned solemn for moment after mentioning that his grandmother passed away a week before. "It was very different having family here than it would have been had either of us been alone. ... We had each other here for support."

Their father told them they should not go back to Mississippi for the funeral because everyone understood what they were doing and that they could say their goodbyes to their grandmother on their return.

Scott and Kevin Smira are a story that is not uncommon in Iraq, but theirs is unique because it doesn't stop there.

Willie Ross, the command sergeant major for Task Force Griffin, is a cousin. Kevin recalled how Willie "kept us in line" growing up in rural Mississippi.

"Willie's driveway is exactly a mile from mine. I know because that is where I turn around when I go for my training runs!" Scott laughed.

The brothers will be joined by their youngest brother in June when he is deployed as an individual augmentee for the Mississippi Air National Guard. Then things will really get interesting. ★



RELEASE & Rescue

Story and Photos by Spc. Michael Uribe
1-171 General Support Aviation Battalion

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – Soldiers from the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade teamed up with Camp Taji’s civilian firefighters earlier this month to practice extricating car crash victims from a smashed-up vehicle.

A decommissioned Ford Explorer was systematically pried open, sliced and diced during the joint training exercise.

“We went from the most basic part of stabilizing the vehicle to some basic entry maneu-

vers—from opening the doors and ultimately taking the roof off the vehicle,” said Spc. Michael Kelley, a flight medic with Charlie Company, 3rd Battalion, 126th Aviation Regiment (Air Ambulance).

The 3-126th is a National Guard unit from Vermont and Massachusetts that is providing medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) services in Iraq in support of Operation New Dawn. The unit is attached to the Georgia National Guard’s 1st General Support Avi-

ation Battalion, 171st Aviation Regiment, which falls under the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade.

The joint training exercise was organized by Kelley, who works as an emergency medical technician and firefighter back home. The training gave the medics and flight crews of the 3-126th some practice using their specialized extrication equipment.

“Today we trained the medics on exactly what steps to use if they come upon a vehicle extrication situation,” said Norman Semanik, a firefighter with the Camp Taji Fire Department.

Semanik trained the Soldiers on how to break the vehicle’s windows and properly secure its battery, with particular attention paid to extractor and victim safety.

A Tactical Tomahawk was used to smash through the windows. A Power Hawk Rescue System pried and cut the vehicle open. A K-12 Rescue Saw cut through its metal frame.

“This is a skill that is perishable, and if we are called to a MEDEVAC scene where we have to extract a patient, it’s good to have those skills because we do have this equipment,” said Maj. Robert Anderson, commander of Charlie Company, 1-126th.

Anderson said that for the Soldiers, this type of training “keeps that edge—that knife edge on what they do.” ★



Spc. Michael Kelley uses a Power Hawk Rescue System during a vehicle extrication exercise at Camp Taji, Iraq.

Huber story continued

the arrival of the CAB's aircraft.

On a hazy afternoon at Camp Buehring, Huber sat on his cot in his 70-man tent and wondered how his current mission would compare to the two in his past.

"This deployment is going to be a lot more challenging because our mission is going to literally change daily," Huber said. "Every day could be a very dull day. Every day could be a very exciting or terrifying day, if you want to look at it that way. I feel like we are on a fence where things could go either way.

"What we did here and the people that have died here and the people who have sacrificed years of their lives for our country and for Iraq and Kuwait—my hope is that the timing is right, that we get out safely—and being the last ones out, that it's been a success." ★

Football story continued

their victory. Each player from the East and West teams wore a football helmet of course, but these helmets were special; each helmet featured a division or major command patch graphic centered on the lower rear portion of the helmet. The presence of a patch painted on the helmets is really where this story begins.

Turner, assigned to the East team, wore a helmet that featured the 11th Aviation Command patch. This patch is worn by the members of 8-229 and identifies the higher command headquarters that issues orders to the battalion. The patch is what these Soldiers are wearing in Iraq.

"We gotta get that," Sablan said after seeing Turner's helmet. "That's our patch!"

The quest was on. The Soldiers of 8-229 sought out Turner on the field and asked him to pose with the battalion for a photo. Turner agreed. One

Soldier mentioned that the helmet was missing something; an "eight ball" sticker.

The "eight ball" symbol is a sort of trademark for the battalion and usually ends up stuck to just about every piece of equipment or building that comes within arm's reach of any 8-229 Soldier. So, in keeping with tradition, an "eight ball" sticker was affixed to Turner's helmet and he struck a pose with the Soldiers.

Sgt. 1st Class Charlie Kelly, noncommissioned officer in charge of the battalion's human resources office, made a valiant attempt at talking Turner out of his helmet but failed; Turner wasn't hearing it. Sablan, Kelly and the rest of the Soldiers headed for the buses and the long trip back to Fort Hood with their spirits dampened by the failure to talk Turner out of his prized helmet.

But all was not lost. Thanks to Spc. Christiena Salm, an Apache Longbow attack helicopter crew chief assigned to Charlie Company, the helmet bearing the 11th Aviation Command patch would accompany the battalion's Soldiers back to Fort Hood. Salm had managed to talk Turner into donating the helmet to the battalion.

Turner, who paid \$200 for the helmet to purchase it from the Army, was not willing to give it up without a lot of thought. In the end, Turner pointed to the American flag sewn on the upper left front of his jersey and said, "You guys make it possible for me to play football by going into harm's way, so it's the least I can do."

The helmet will fly aboard attack helicopters during missions in Iraq. The future of the helmet upon return to the United States has not been determined yet. Something tells me that Landon Turner will see it again. ★



