

# Balad and beyond

## Apaches patrol skies over LSA Anaconda

Story and photos by  
Dennis Johnson  
414th Base Support Battalion  
Public Affairs Office

Deploying to Iraq has been the experience of a lifetime for members of Hanau's 1-501st Aviation Regiment. Soldiers of the Apache helicopter unit found themselves working hard at Logistical Support Area Anaconda as their yearlong tour started to wind down.

"This place threw me for a loop," said Pfc. Daniel Barnett of Company B, 1-501st Aviation. Barnett, age 21, from Oklahoma, is in charge of the mechanical maintenance of Apache aircraft and consults with the pilots as they perform pre-flight inspections.

"This is an experience I'll never have again. I've had fun out here and hard times, but we got the job done. Bravo Company is here doing a whole battalion's job, but we're doing it as a company. That's why I think we're the best."

Company B moved north from Baghdad International Airport to Balad Airbase in mid-January, said the company commander, Maj. Shane Curtis, with six Apache helicopters and 62 Soldiers, along with a few Soldiers from the regiment's Headquarters and Headquarters Company and Company D, its maintenance company.

"The 6-6th Cavalry redeployed to Illesheim — they were here for a year, so they needed us here," he said. "We arrived on Jan. 15. It was 40 degrees, raining and dark — not a very pleasant move. We're living in tents now, but we'll move into better quarters as soon as the 6-6th Cav moves out. It's OK here, but different than Baghdad — we don't have as many creature comforts. At BIAP we could hit Burger King with a rock and the PX was right next door."

"Our primary mission here in Balad is reconnaissance and surveillance around LSA Anaconda, to keep the perimeter secure. The typical range of a mortar is about five kilometers, so we patrol a good distance out," said Curtis. "Another mission is escort flights. We provide armed escorts, mostly from Baghdad for Blackhawk helicopters with VIPs onboard. The Blackhawks are used to move critical supplies and people around the country. So we'll stay busy."

"Our specific missions come down from V Corps Headquarters, passed through the 12th Aviation



An Apache helicopter of Hanau's 1-501st Aviation Regiment prepares to take off from the Balad Airfield at Logistical Support Area Anaconda as the sun sets on another day in Iraq.



1st Lt. Brande L. Goracke, Apache co-pilot/gunner, pre-flights an Apache helicopter at LSA Anaconda in Balad, Iraq.

Group," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Chris Batt, the company standardization and instructor pilot. "We're looking for the guys with mortars and shoulder-fired surface to air missiles. It's the same mission as in Baghdad, just in new territory. The missions here are a little easier because the terrain is so open; they [Iraqi insurgents] have a difficult time hiding from us. In Baghdad they could fire and then just step into a house."

Bravo Company's helicopters stand like Soldiers at attention on the airfield's taxiway while crew chiefs climb over them making final checks before the pilots arrive for a late afternoon pre-flight. The Apaches fly around the clock, but more missions fly at night to take advantage of the darkness.

"I've always wanted to be a pilot, ever since I was old enough to walk," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Zach Johnson, the youngest pilot in the company. "I grew up outside of an Air Force base and first flew in a plane when I was 13, a friend's

crew duster."

Johnson was studying commercial aviation when an Army recruiter called up one day and asked if he'd like to fly helicopters for the Army. "It sounded like a good deal so I went and checked it out," he said. Now he flies missions all times of the day and night.

"Here the business of your day just wears you out, with six people in a tent all on different schedules. But the flying is exciting and extremely busy," said Johnson.

"We always fly in a 'flight' of two Apaches. You talk on three different radios, one to the ground forces, one to air traffic control and one to the other aircraft. We contact Cav as soon as we take off and they give us the situation, so we have the latest overall picture of what's going on," he said. "We can even talk to a particular platoon or squad that we're supporting. We might call them to come out from their observation post if we see something suspicious, guide them to the specific house or vehicle

and then provide aerial security while they're completing the mission.

"During the day, when we fly over a school, the kids will just come pouring out, waving. Sometimes the teachers will spank the kids to make them stop waving, but some teachers wave too. A few kids throw rocks, but the majority are waving and happy to see us," said Johnson.

Flying as co-pilot and gunner for this evening's mission is 1st Lt. Brande Goracke. The Springfield, Va., native is something of a rarity — a woman pilot. Goracke landed in Baghdad as her first assignment after one and half years of flight school.

"I came right out of flight school, and I'm getting a lot of experience. We fly usually two to three hours a day, but it can go as high as six or seven," she said. "It's pretty much what I expected, it's not so bad. Baghdad was very busy. Because it's a crowded city there are lots more places for people to hide and a lot of places we can't shoot into."

Working with Johnson and Barnett, Goracke goes through the preflight inspection of her aircraft hours before the mission begins. One of the items she checks is the video recorder. "We videotape every mission, which goes to intelligence whether anything happened or not — it's a form of intelligence used all the time," she said.

Helicopters are extremely high maintenance, requiring about three hours of work on the ground for every hour in the air. "We're responsible to get them up in time. The pilots rely on us so they can complete their missions," said Barnett.

After the pilots finish their preflight they return to their quarters to relax before the preflight briefing. As darkness falls they'll take off for the night's mission. All night Soldiers will hear their Apaches circling, keeping the airbase safe and secure.



Hanau aviators log thousands of hours of flying time while supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom



Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chuck Juul, instructor pilot for 2-501st Aviation, flies a Blackhawk near Baghdad International Airport. Photo left: Members of Company B, 2-501st Aviation, perform maintenance on a Blackhawk at Baghdad International Airport.

# Flying the unfriendly skies of Iraq

Photos by Dennis Johnson  
414th Base Support Battalion Public  
Affairs Office

Like Soldiers throughout Iraq, members of the 2nd Battalion, 501st Aviation

Regiment, face danger whether they are on the ground maintaining and repairing their equipment or taking to the skies over and around Baghdad.

Despite the daily perils and challenges of serving in an unforgiving climate, the pilots, crew members and other Soldiers of the Fliegerhorst-based unit have made

their presence known — serving diligently to ensure the men and women of 1st Armored Division and fellow units are provided with first-rate aviation support wherever it is needed.

See photos on this page for an inside look at one small piece of the puzzle known as Operation Iraqi Freedom.



A Blackhawk crew chief keeps a watchful eye for gunfire during a mission in Iraq. Photo right: An aerial view of houses near Baghdad International Airport.



A Blackhawk of the 2-501st Aviation Regiment comes in for a landing at Baghdad International Airport.