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‘VIP COMPANY’ HELPS KEEP SPECIAL PASSENGERS OFF IRAQ’S DANGEROUS STREETS

By Sgt. Brandon Little

12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AREA ANACONDA, Balad, Iraq -- As the rotor blades slowly begin to spin on a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, its crew conducts last-minute checks.

The flight crew, from U.S. Army, Europe's A Co. 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation, focuses intently on the mission at hand as the blades begin to pick up speed.

Their mission is to transport a few of the most senior and influential personnel in Iraq.

Transporting passengers ranging from the commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq to U.S. senators, Iraqi dignitaries and even CBS news anchor Katie Couric each day has earned A Company the nickname “VIP Company.”



SGT BRANDON LITTLE

A UH-60 Black Hawk crew from U.S. Army, Europe's A Co. 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation Regiment, prepares to take off from Logistical Support Area Anaconda, Iraq on a “VIP mission.”

“Because of the threat to wheeled vehicles, we have been tasked with the vital mission of transporting VIPs,” said Capt. Brian Stickney, A Company commander. “Flying with us gives leaders the freedom to move around the battlefield.”

Accomplishing this mission isn't an easy task considering there are only 55 personnel in "VIP Company."

"Everyone in our company flies except our supply clerk," said A Company 1st Sgt. Allen Morgan. "In addition to my duties as the company first sergeant, I am also a door gunner."

The company handles any VIP request to fly, day or night. Most requests are received just a few days in advance.

"We fly when we are needed, so we are on their schedule," said Stickney, who is also a pilot for his unit. "There are usually about 12 missions a week, and that can mean anywhere from 60 to 80 hours of flying each week."

"I love to fly, and I think our mission here is very important," said crew chief Spc. Jimmy Blundell. "Plus I get the opportunity to meet a lot of important people."

To accommodate their special passengers, the unit's aircraft have been equipped with a few special features.

"We have a special type of communications console with radios and computers that allow commanders to track the battle on the ground," said Stickney.

Although these aircraft may have high-tech communications equipment and influential passengers on the inside, outside they look like any other Black Hawk.

"I don't feel like we're a bigger target, because we look like any other aircraft and we fly the same areas," said A Company pilot Chief Warrant Officer 2 Susan Pensinger. "I don't think anyone knows the difference between the people we carry and who everyone else carries."

Each VIP mission transports up to 10 personnel, so it's pretty much the VIPs and those they invite to fly with them, said Stickney.

"I wake up every morning thinking this is the best job in the world," said Morgan. "The mission may be a little different, but at the end of the day I know we're doing a great thing."



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