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TASK FORCE XII 'SHERPA' SOLDIERS CARRY THE LOAD THROUGH SKIES OF IRAQ

By Sgt. 1st Class Chris Seaton
12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AREA ANACONDA, Balad, Iraq -- The sun went down a few hours ago. Their work day just beginning, the Soldiers of Foxtrot Company, 207th Theater Aviation are already sweating under 35 pounds of body armor and flight uniforms.

Day-shift
Soldiers on
Logistics
Support Area
Anaconda who
regularly toil
under
temperatures in
the 120s would
laugh at
complaints
about the heat at
night, but for a
bunch of guys
from Alaska, 93
degrees at 10
p.m. is
irritatingly
balmy.



SGT 1ST CLASS CHRIS SEATON

Crew members working with the Operational Support Airlift Command's C-23 'Sherpa' aircraft make final preparations for late-night missions to be flown over Iraq. The Sherpa teams, from the Alaska Army National Guard, are currently working with V Corps' 12th Combat Aviation Brigade as part of Task Force XII in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“When we left Anchorage in May, it was getting up to almost 50 degrees in the daytime,” said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Steve Henslee. “So, yeah, the weather here is a little different.”

“Different” is something they’ve become accustomed to. They are fixed-wing aircraft pilots and flight engineers who fly the Alaska Army National Guard’s C-23 Sherpa, a small utility plane that has been serving the light cargo air mission for troops in Iraq.

“We’re sort of the black sheep around here,” said flight engineer Sgt. 1st Class Phillip Davis. Most people don’t think about airplanes when they talk about Army aviation, he said.

The Soldiers of Foxtrot Company are assigned to the Operational Support Airlift Command, the fixed-wing aircraft command for the National Guard. In Iraq, OSACOM works with V Corps’ 12th Combat Aviation Brigade as part of Task Force XII.

Though organized with the Army, the aviators live and work on the opposite side of LSA Anaconda, spending most of their time with U.S. Air Force personnel and aircraft that dwarf the 30-foot-long Sherpa.

“The Air Force doesn’t pay much attention to us, and the active-duty Army doesn’t quite know what to make of us,” said Davis.

That may be, but it doesn’t take long to realize the value of a cargo airplane for the Army.



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Staff Sgt. George Koval, a flight engineer with the Alaska National Guard’s Foxtrot Company, 207th Tactical Aviation overseas a midnight pallet drop-off through the back gate of a C-23 ‘Sherpa’ airplane at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. The Sherpa teams are currently working with V Corps’ 12th Aviation Brigade in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Sherpa is named after a tribe of Nepalese people who live in the Solukhumbu region of Nepal below Mount Everest. They are known for being strong, stout and faithful porters and load carriers who are the

backbone to any climber trying to reach the summit.

Like their

namesake, the Army's version of the Sherpa has proven a reliable load carrier that flies higher, faster and further than its helicopters. And because it's a fixed wing aircraft, the cost of operation and maintenance is much lower.

"We can't carry the load of a Chinook (helicopter), but we are very flexible and ready to respond at a moment's notice, at a fraction of the cost," said Henslee.

"We're basically the FedEx of the desert," said Davis. "Our main mission is hauling passengers and cargo,"

"The mission can change quickly, though," he added. "We may think we're picking up one standard pallet load and a few passengers, and -- like tonight -- we end up with boxes of lifesaving blood. We hauled it quickly, and for about a tenth of the cost (of flying it in a helicopter)."

The pilots and crew on board the Sherpas are all experienced Army aviators. Each of them started in more traditional roles on helicopters. Most spent years flying in rotary-wing aircraft before attending the fixed-wing course at Fort Rucker, Ala.

"It's a completely different style of flying," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 David Stettenbenz, a Sherpa pilot.

"The main difference is that if a helicopter has mechanical problems, they can set it down in the desert. We don't have that option," said Davis.

As with any mission in a combat zone, the dangers are present and very real, but the crews say they don't think much about it while flying the night skies over Iraq.

"Because we fly at such a high level, we rarely get shot at," said Stettenbenz. "We get to see some pretty cool stuff though. We have a really unique role out here."

Last month, the ten aircraft of the 207th TAC flew 1.1 million pounds of cargo and 2,478 passengers in 696 flight hours.

"We keep a lot of troops off the road," said Staff Sgt. George Koval, a C-23 flight engineer. "That means a lot less (improvised explosive devices) and a lot more Soldiers going home safe."



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