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U.S. ARMY EUROPE AVIATORS SERVE UP 'CATFISH AIR' TO MOVE COALITION PERSONNEL ACROSS IRAQ

By Sgt. Brandon Little

12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AREA ANACONDA, Balad, Iraq -- Traveling in a convoy in Iraq can be dangerous, time-consuming and just an all-around inconvenience. Flying can be a quicker and less dangerous method of travel, but not all bases in the country have large enough runways.



SGT BRANDON LITTLE

Spc. Billy Robinson Jr., a Task Force XII radio and telephone operator working in the advisory tower at "Catfish Air," gets information on an inbound flight. The Catfish Air service, based at Logistical Support Area Anaconda in Balad, Iraq, provides helicopter passenger service throughout the country to U.S., Iraqi and coalition civilian and military personnel.

Another option that has become popular among military and civilians on Logistical Support Area Anaconda is "Catfish Air."

Catfish Air is a helicopter passenger service that coordinates rotary-wing flights for personnel traveling throughout Iraq, operated by Soldiers from Task Force XII, led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

"The name 'Catfish Air' came from a Mississippi National Guard unit operating the terminal during Operation Iraqi Freedom II," said Capt. Mackie Brownell, the Task Force XII's officer-in-charge of Catfish Air and aviation advisory tower.

Task Force XII picked up the mission started by that National Guard unit more than three years ago. The majority of the helicopters used to accomplish this mission are UH-60 Black Hawks, but CH-47 Chinooks fly about 10 percent of their flights as well.

"Since we took over, we have improved what we could to make passenger travel run smoother," said

Staff Sgt. John Santoro, the Task Force XII NCO-in-charge of Catfish Air. “The Soldiers and civilians here are doing a great job making sure people get to where they need to go.”

“In August alone, we moved nearly 11,000 personnel in more than 1,500 helicopters designated for passenger transport,” said Brownell. “This service isn’t just for military; we also fly civilian contractors, AAFES employees and members of the Iraqi security forces.”

Members of other coalition forces also use the service.

“We have to fly as part of our force protection (mission), and it’s also a lot safer,” said Sgt. Dave Pickles, an Australian Army Soldier and Catfish passenger. “I think the people that work here are very helpful, and they have a good facility with plenty of cool water to drink.”

Transporting Soldiers to conduct combat operations is also a big part of Catfish Air’s job.

“When we have to move Soldiers on missions, we can have up to 1,000 people in the terminal a day,” said Brownell. “The noise level can be unbelievable when you have that many people and up to 10 helicopters trying to fly out all at once. It can really create an ulcer.”

It takes a concerted effort to ensure passengers are manifested for seats for a flight, get their bags on the aircraft, get safely on board and managed by the aircraft’s crew chief, and get off to their destinations.

“We work pretty smoothly together,” said Staff Sgt. Mike Gunderson, a crew chief from A Company, 2nd Battalion, 147th Aviation, a Minnesota National Guard battalion that is part of Task Force XII. “If this is what we need to do to support the war fighter, then I’m all for it.”

“A lot of things people need to do can’t happen without us,” said Spc. Billy Robinson Jr., a Catfish Air radio and telephone operator. “Whether it’s flying a Soldier to Rest and Relaxation leave or flying troops to conduct missions, we get the job done.”

The Catfish Air team's efforts and support have made the service a popular choice when it comes to traveling in Iraq.

“In the morning, you can fly down to Baghdad to do what you have to do, and be back on LSA Anaconda by dinner,” said Brownell. “We give great flexibility for people to conduct operations outside of their work area.”

