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U.S. ARMY EUROPE 'STORM RIDERS' TEAM WITH INFANTRY TROOPS FOR IRAQ AIR ASSAULT MISSIONS

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SGT 1ST CLASS CHRIS SEATON
Chief Warrant Officer 2 Daniel Bickett and Spc. Joshua Brooks, members of a CH-47 Chinook flight crew from U.S. Army Europe's B Company, 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation, conduct a mission briefing before departing on a late-night air assault operation from Logistical Support Area Anaconda, Iraq.

LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AREA

ANACONDA, Balad, Iraq -- It's 2 a.m. on a brisk November morning in an Iraqi village. The night sky is clear, and the insurgent fighters who've been operating out of the village are sleeping. In the distance, a guard on lookout hears what sounds like a helicopter.

Sounds can play tricks in the desert -- especially at night -- but within moments the sound becomes deafening. One faint helicopter heard in the distance becomes 10 menacing aircraft descending on the village.

Before the guard can rouse his fellow insurgents, the aircraft have landed. Waves of coalition infantrymen pour out of UH-60 Black Hawks and CH-47 Chinook helicopters from all sides of the village.

A armor-clad warriors emerge from the massive dust clouds kicked up by helicopter rotors as even more aircraft -- lethal AH-64 Apaches this time -- hover overhead, practically begging enemy militias for an opportunity to fire their 30mm guns.

The village is surrounded, and the battle is over before it began.

This is the typical air assault mission here; a complex, joint and combined arms operation that involves infantrymen, Air Force aircraft, three types of U.S. Army helicopters, and the Soldiers of Task Force Storm.

The 'Storm Riders' are the air assault battalion for Task Force XII, the aviation task force led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade. The battalion has successfully taken part in dozens of these missions since arriving in Iraq this summer.

"The mobility that helicopters give the infantry is amazing," said Lt. Col. Jay Macklin, Task Force Storm commander. "We can arrive at any time, day or night, and the enemy never knows how big a force is coming; where we're coming from; where we're going to land, or what we're going to do."

Without the aircraft, the infantry would be forced to convoy on Iraq's dangerous roads. Soldiers on the ground are just as efficient, but they face improvised explosive devices. Trucks also move more slowly, and arrive one at a time. Without the aircraft, the enemy may be ready before coalition forces arrive.

"The enemy is not stupid, and we know that," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Clark Hall, a Task Force Storm pilot. "We bring the element of surprise they wouldn't have without us."



MAJ TERRY RODESKY

A CH-47 Chinook helicopter from 'Big Windy' -- U.S. Army Europe's B Company, 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation -- spins up for takeoff for a late-night air assault mission in Iraq. The helicopter, part of Task Force Storm here, is loaded with Soldiers preparing for an infiltration in Iraq.

Even with the helicopters, the battle is very real for infantrymen and aviators alike.

"Their threat is our threat," said Capt. Samuel Redding, commander of A Company, 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation and a former infantryman. "If they're worried about IEDs, so are we. A lot of our door gunners tell me that if we're going in shooting they want to get off with the infantry guys and help."

The door gunners are trained to lay down suppressive fire and to help land the aircraft during hostile landings. During the few critical moments the helicopter is on the ground and Soldiers are focused on the assault, it's the door gunner's job to keep everyone safe.

"Sometimes when I'm flying with the ground Soldiers, it hits me," said Sgt.

Steven Kellam, a Task Force Storm crew chief and door gunner. “I look around at the infantry guys we’re about to land with, and wonder how many of them are going to be riding back with us.”

“The majority of my guys don’t even think about it as being ‘tip-of-the-spear-type’ dangerous duty,” said Redding. “They get to see the guys who are out there eating dirt. They see the guys who are really working.”

The aviation side involves more than just the Soldiers in the helicopters though, said Macklin.

“These are very complex missions with a lot of moving pieces,” he said. “During an assault, the entire battalion is at work, day or night ... everything from planning the mission; tracking the battle in the tactical operations center; refueling aircraft, or maintenance -- it’s one big collective effort.”

The key, though, said Macklin, is a habitual relationship with ground commanders. For an operation to run smoothly, the Soldiers in the air and on the ground have to be on the same page.

“We play a big part, but we’re just one piece of the operation,” said Hall. “These guys on the ground are the ones doing the real work.”

But when the pieces come together, Macklin said, the element of surprise, the efficiency, and the speed create a lethal package.

“We’ve become a big part of the combined arms team,” he said.

At 2:10 a.m. the cool air is still filled with dust as the roar of the aircraft has once again given way to a distant sound of a single helicopter.

But the village itself is different. What was recently a militia stronghold is now quickly becoming a safe Iraqi village. And the insurgents never knew what hit them.



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