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RELEASE #2008-01-07-03

Jan. 7, 2008

CREW CHIEFS ON THE GROUND KEEP APACHE HELICOPTERS OF U.S. ARMY EUROPE-LED TASK FORCE FIGHTING IN THE AIR

By Sgt. Brandon Little

12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

CAMP TAJI, Iraq -- The Soldiers who serve as crew chiefs for the Army's AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters are proud of their aircraft. They're quick to tell you the Apache is one of the most advanced pieces of equipment in the Army's arsenal.



SGT BRANDON LITTLE

Spc. Christopher Kell, a crew chief in Tomahawk Troop, 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, checks the tail rotor on an AH-64D Apache helicopter before it takes off on a mission from Camp Taji, Iraq. Kell's troop is part of Task Force XII, the aviation task force led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

They boast that the 58 foot-long war machine travels up to 227 miles per hour and is armed with as many as 16 Hellfire rockets and 75 2.75-inch aerial rockets, and can carry 1,200 rounds for its 30 millimeter machine gun.

They'll tell you how their pilots are trained to maneuver their machines to engage the enemy and quickly ruin an insurgent's day.

But the one thing most of them can't tell you is what it's like to ride in one.

Unlike UH-60 Black Hawk, or CH-47 Chinook helicopters, Apaches are designed to carry only two pilots, even though it's the crew chiefs on the ground that keep the aircraft in the fight and running at top performance.

"The crew chiefs are constantly repairing and servicing these aircraft," said Apache pilot Capt. Chad Corrigan, commander of Tomahawk Troop, 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. The 4-3rd is part of Task Force XII, the aviation task force here led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

“Even though they don’t fly with us, they play a vital role in launch-recover-launch operations.”

“Launch-recover-launch” refers to an aircraft taking off on a mission, coming back, being serviced and then taking off again, all within a small window of time.



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Spcs. Charles Ballato (left) and Christopher Kell, crew chiefs in Tomahawk Troop, 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, salute an AH-64D Apache crew preparing to take off on a mission. The troop is part of Task Force XII, the aviation task force led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

“Apaches may all look the same, but they definitely don’t act the same,” said Staff Sgt. Jason Combs, a Tomahawk Troop maintenance supervisor and crew chief. “I don’t mind not being able to fly with the helicopters, because I know my job is still important to the pilots.”

For every hour these helicopters are flown, says Corrigan, crew chiefs perform an average of seven hours of maintenance.

“There are usually two crew chiefs assigned to each (helicopter); one per shift,” said Combs. “This allows us to fly these ‘birds’ 24/7.”

“When the aircraft comes to us we check it, double-check it, and then check it again,” said crew chief Spc. Christopher Kell, who is also qualified to work on Black Hawks. “(The pilots) wouldn’t be able to fly without us taking care of the ‘birds’ while they’re on the ground.”

“If I had the opportunity, I wouldn’t mind taking a flight with them,” said Kell. “Even if I never do, I still feel proud knowing the aircraft I just fixed is about to go save lives and do great things.”

In addition to performing maintenance on the aircraft, crew chiefs also help guide the aircraft to areas from which they can take off.

“The pilots can’t see behind them, and can’t tell if their rotors are too close to something,” said crew chief Spc. Charles Ballato. “Helping the helicopters back up on the

parking pad can be scary because the aircraft can sometimes turn a little wide and you get pretty close to the tail rotor.”

Once the helicopter is cleared for takeoff, the crew chief gives the pilot a sharp salute and watches as the Apache takes off.

“We salute the pilots as they leave to show them honor, because we don’t know if this will be the last time we ever see them,” said Kell. “We lost some pilots last time we were here, and we know that’s part of the job, but I just hope the pilot and the aircraft come back safe.”

“I get a little nervous every time I watch my bird take off, because I always wonder, ‘What if I didn’t do something right?’ or ‘What if something breaks?’,” said Ballato. “The pilots trust us to take care of these ‘birds’ and I don’t want to let them down.”



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