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AIR FORCE WEATHER TEAM VITAL TO KEEPING AIRCRAFT OF U.S. ARMY EUROPE-LED TASK FORCE FLYING IN IRAQ

By Sgt. 1st Class Chris Seaton

12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

CAMP TAJI, Iraq -- Adrift in a sea of black-and-white maps and radar images that litter the office hangs a photo of a beautiful beach with crystal-blue water and palm trees gently swaying in the breeze. This depiction of perfect weather seems oddly out of place for a weather office in a country where the weather is anything but perfect.

And the team at the Task Force XII staff weather office is used to feeling a little out of place. The eight non-flight Airmen, working amongst a few thousand Soldier-aviators who patrol the skies of Baghdad every day, are proud of their unique role supporting the aviation task force here led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.



SGT 1ST CLASS CHRIS SEATON

“Providing support for the Army, or going to work on an Army base - there are a lot of misconceptions about

what we know about the Army, or what they know about us,” said Tech. Sgt. David Ivey, a battlefield weather forecaster. “It’s a good experience, and when it comes down to it, we’re all pretty much the same.”

Tech. Sgt. David Ivey records weather data from the roof of the Task Force XII tactical operations center at Camp Taji, Iraq Dec. 10. Ivey is one of a team of eight U.S. Air Force weather experts who support the aviation task force led by U.S. Army Europe's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

Ivey has been working with the Army for two of his six years as a weather forecaster. He says that despite the obvious uniform differences, he and his fellow Airmen live and work alongside the Army just like any Soldiers in the brigade.

There is one minor difference. While the Soldiers will serve 15 months in Iraq, the Airmen are here and back home in five months, in accordance with U.S. Air Force policy.

“Our co-workers (in the Army) tease us about the shorter tours, but teasing is pretty much all it is,” said Ivey.

“The Soldiers in this brigade are great people. They’re aviators, so they’re about as close to the Air Force as you can get,” said Capt. Shawn Beskar, staff weather officer. “We get good support from them, and I think we provide good support in return.”

That support is vital to flight operations, he said.

“We take weather observations, looking out for hazardous weather, so if a warning needs to be issued, we’ll take care of that,” said Beskar. “We also provide mission services, which are the flight weather briefings for the crews. We deliver updated weather forecasts in person to the pilots, and answer the radio when pilots contact us for updates, and we provide the weather briefs for the leadership to help them plan missions.”

In addition to the immediate support for the brigade, the team also sends its weather data through an automated network to the Air Force Weather Agency in Omaha, Neb., making it available to computer networks around the world.

Much of their weather collection is done through internet weather hubs that produce analysis of weather, and with their own sophisticated equipment that takes automated measurements. But one of the team's most reliable pieces of equipment is the ladder outside their window.

“At least once an hour, one of our observers goes up to the roof of the building and takes the weather observations,” said Beskar. “We’re looking for known markers at certain distances to see how far we can see. We’re looking at the sky’s condition, the kinds of clouds, and the altitude of those clouds.”

“For the most part the weather’s pretty good, so the job’s not too stressful,” said Ivey. “Bad weather here usually has to do with dust or smoke.”

“When (bad) weather’s coming it gets a lot more stressful. A lot of people are asking a lot of questions and you want to give them the right answer,” he said. “You want to make sure that your warnings are correct, because a bad report can have a pretty negative impact on operations.”

When they leave their current assignments, the Airmen assigned to Task Force XII may return to Air Force bases, concentrating on weather that affects aircraft such as F-16 Fighting Falcons or C-130 Hercules instead of Army UH-60 Black Hawk or AH-64 Apache helicopters.

“Weather is weather, of course,” said Beskar. “Most of the Air Force assets are flying a lot higher, and maybe a lot faster, so the things they’re going to be affected by are going to be different.

“Helicopters are flying lower. They’re in the weather,” he said. “So we have to be especially attentive to the details.”

On this wet, cold January day, the weather in Taji is nowhere near as perfect as the photo in their office, but the Airmen of the Task Force XII weather office assure the Army there’s good weather on the horizon ... and if that prediction changes, they’ll be the first to know.



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