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### Unmanned aerial vehicle experts keeping 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division's eyes in the skies

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**BAGHDAD, Iraq** -- Unmanned aerial vehicles have become a staple in Operation Iraqi Freedom -- and keeping them airborne is key to their success.



PHOTO COURTESY 2ND BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 1ST ARMORED DIVISION  
Unmanned aerial vehicle maintenance engineers Sgt. John Neff (left) and Spc. Jason McDuffee of the 502nd Military Intelligence Company perform preflight maintenance on a UAV in Iraq, Dec. 2. The company is part of the 47th Forward Support Battalion of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division.

The Soldiers of the 502nd Military Intelligence Company, 47th Forward Support Battalion, are tasked with maintaining, launching and recovering UAVs. The unit, part of the 1st Armored Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, keep the aircraft flying throughout the 2nd BCT's operational environment here.

The company's mission is to ensure the "Iron Brigade's" UAVs are maintained and mission capable, as well as to serve as the launch team -- the initial pilots for brigade missions.

"We launch the UAVs ... and fly them out away from the base," said Spc. Jonny Walling, one of the 502nd's UAV operators. "Pilots at a ground control station ... then take over the controls and use them for their assigned unit mission."

The UAVs are the “eyes in the sky” for a brigade that covers a lot of ground. The 2nd BCT operates in an area roughly twice the size of Baghdad.

“We support all the land units of the 2nd BCT by providing near-real-time video of an overhead point of view for all operations,” said platoon sergeant Sgt. 1st Class Steven Marin. “It allows the unit commanders extra situational awareness for any mission.”

The information provided by UAVs allows brigade commanders the ability to check and verify situations that would otherwise require a patrol search that would take hours.

“We bring another level to the commanders’ overall situational awareness, allowing them a chance to check things that would take a lot longer for troops on the ground to find out, from seeing if a high-value insurgent is at his house to if smugglers are trying to cross a river or canal at night,” said UAV operator Spc. Sam Bishop. “If we see something suspicious, we report it. I personally found an (improvised explosive device) ... and I’m proud that I’m doing a job that can save lives of the troops on the ground.”

To date, the unit’s UAVs have recorded more than 2,500 flight hours and more than 400 launches and recoveries during the eight months the 502nd has been deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



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