



Airmen assist Iraqis with gunner training

by Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski
AFCENT Combat Camera Team

8/6/2009 - **CAMP TAJI, Iraq** -- *This is the second in a three-part series about Airmen deployed to Camp Taji, Iraq, where they assist in training members of the Iraqi Air Force in helicopter maintenance, gunner and piloting skills.*

Thanks to a trio of Airmen here, members of the Iraqi Air Force are learning to provide their own air power for their own missions.

The three Airmen are part of the 721st Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, whose mission is to "train, advise and assist" the Iraqis at the helicopter squadrons here.

The Iraqi gunners' PKC machine guns are mounted to makeshift metal platforms, and the gunners are trained to defend their crew and cargo against threats.

"The Iraqi gunners are as integral a part of the crew for their helicopter, as we are for ours back home," said Tech. Sgt. Michael Burt, a flight engineer from Andrews Air Force Base, Md, who instructs Iraqis on aerial gunnery. "Our students have come a long way from when this program started a few years ago. They know how to call out warnings for their pilots and we're constantly working on improving gun skills and weapon familiarity."

In addition, Sergeant Burt and his fellow instructors are working on getting senior Iraqi gunners to do a majority of the teaching to the younger troops. The more the Iraqis are teaching their own students, the more progress is made, Sergeant Burt said.

Before Iraqi gunners can fly missions on their own, they must complete a 19-flight syllabus. Aboard their helicopters, the American and Iraqi instructors run their students through a series of scenarios, such as gun jams, engaging hostile contacts or providing covering fire. They also emphasize safety, like ensuring passengers are wearing seatbelts and cargo is tied down properly. And although the space is cramped, it's not the most difficult part of the job for the Airmen.

"We have to work around a fairly limited schedule and some definite language barriers," Sergeant Burt, a Grand Island, Neb., native, said.

There are crew rest considerations and each month the Iraqis get time to travel to their homes and visit their families, said Staff Sgt. Michael France, an instructor deployed from Malmstrom AFB, Mont.

"They have a lot of young troops, but they're proud of what they're doing," said Sergeant France, a Branson, Mo., native. "In fact, some of their best days are when they get to start wearing the NVG patch on their uniform."

NVG stands for "night vision goggles" and wearing the patch means a student has been certified to fly night missions. It's an important step in their career development, Sergeant Burt said.

"That capability means the Iraqis can operate at any time, any place," Sergeant Burt said. "When the Iraqis start working with their army counterparts to perform counter-insurgency missions, it will mean they can do so day or night, and that's critical to being able to operate on their own."

As long as the Iraqis continue their training after, they'll be able to do just that, Sergeant France added.

"The day you stop training is the day you lose the fight," he said.

In addition to training maintenance and aircrews, the Iraqi squadrons defend infrastructure and resources in Iraq. They're also charged with providing air power for their troops on the ground, defending the populace from insurgents and providing stability.



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Onnez Rodriguez-Massas, far right, an aerial gunner with the 721st Air Expeditionary Advisor Squadron, speaks through an interpreter to two Iraqi air force aerial gunners prior to a night mission at Camp Taji, Iraq, July 12, 2009. Sergeant Rodriguez-Massas is deployed from Andrews Air Force Base, Md. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Michael B. Keller) (Released)