



Airmen assist Iraqis with helicopter pilot training

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8/21/2009 - **CAMP TAJI, Iraq** -- *This is the third 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.*

Iraqi pilots love patches. They have as much pride in their squadrons as their American counterparts and will be the first to show off the patch on their uniform and boast about their squadron.

"In many ways, that's a success story," said Capt. Bryan Tuinman, one of seven instructor pilots with the 721st Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron here.

The patch on their arms reads "Advise, Assist, Train." Their job is to ensure Iraqi aircrews are able to do everything from planning and briefing to actually flying missions and working as part of a team.

"We want to get them to a point where they're self-sufficient and teaching their own students again," said Captain Tuinman, who is deployed from F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo. "When Iraqi instructors are teaching Iraqi pilots to fly Iraqi missions over Iraq, then we can call it a day and go home."

But getting to that point means tackling a variety of challenges. For one, the language barrier slows basic conversation, not to mention talking to each other during a mission. Iraqi pilots are learning to communicate in English so they can work with air traffic control towers manned by coalition troops.

The members of the Iraqi Air Force are also granted extended periods of time away from the installation, called *mujas*, so they can travel home to spend time with their families.

"They're proud of being pilots, but many of them can't tell their families what they do," Captain Tuinman said. "But when you see them fly over a crowd in their helicopters with Iraqi flags on the side, it gives both the crews and the people a sense of satisfaction. It's amazing to see that in person."

Before coming to Camp Taji, the American aircrews went through three months of training. In addition to skill training most Airmen receive before a deployment, the pilots had to learn to fly Iraqi helicopters at Fort Bliss, Texas or Destin, Fla. They also attended a course to better prepare them for their advisory mission.

"We don't necessarily want them to do everything our way," said Lt. Col. Michael McNerney, the squadron's commander, deployed from Fairchild AFB, Wash. "We're showing them how we do things and more importantly, why we do them that way. We show them that better preparation means a smoother, more effective mission. And that safety is an imperative part of operations."

With Iraqi pilots taking the reins in training their own, the Airmen take a step back and only intervene when needed. Once their students have basic flying skills mastered, they're able to train for more advanced missions, said Colonel McNerney.

"Our next step is to teach them how to fly counter-insurgency missions," the colonel said. "For that, they need to be able to operate day or night, so that means training with night-vision goggles, and most of them are coming along pretty well with that."

For Colonel McNerney, assisting the Iraqi pilots will go a long way in rebuilding the country.

"In order to have a credible and sovereign government, you have to have a military that can defend it and its



U.S. Air Force Capt. Bryan Tuinman an Mi-171 pilot with the 721st Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, discusses an upcoming mission with an Iraqi Air Force Airmen at Taji Air Base, Iraq, July 13, 2009. Airmen from the 721st help train and advise Iraqi Airmen in many aspects of helicopter pilot, aerial gunner, and maintenance training. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Michael B. Keller) (Released)

people," Colonel McNerney said. "These pilots fly missions where they defend their people at religious celebrations and rebuilding efforts across the country. They are an essential part of the future of Iraq."

The Iraqi air force flies the Mi-17, Mi-171, UH-1 Huey and Jet Ranger helicopters from Taji Air Base. In addition to training maintenance and aircrews, the Iraqi helicopter squadrons defend infrastructure elements like power lines and other facilities. They're also charged with providing air power for their troops on the ground, defending the populace from insurgents and providing stability.