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6/4/2009 - FORWARD OPERATING BASE FALCON, Iraq -- As the U.S. military begins to withdraw combat forces, transition training teams continue to bring stabilization to the country of Iraq, oftentimes mentoring while a war for security continues to beset the country.

For the 732nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron Det. 3 Airmen who have become the foundation of the Police Transition Training team for Baghdad, Iraq, the effort of training, mentoring and supporting the Iraqi Police has been a challenge eased only by the bond they formed together in pre-deployment training.

The FOB Falcon PTT louts a mixture of security forces Airmen from 48 bases with varying levels of experience. One defining characteristic of this team is most of the Airmen serving this 365-day deployed assignment are here voluntarily.

"This group of Airmen define 'service before self,'" said Tech. Sgt. Robert King, deployed from the 90th Missile Security Forces Squadron at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo. "All but maybe three people volunteered for this deployment and even they are completely committed to being here and seeing this through."

Fulfilling an obligation that will take a person away from everything they know - family, friends and the comforts of home - requires a sacrifice greater than packing bags and saying scripted good-byes.

For many Airmen, it means bidding farewell to a lifestyle that is unchallenged by the constant threat of war, immediate harm or possible death. What gives a person the strength to volunteer for something like this?

Deploying has become synonymous with learning how to build relationships with people previously unknown to you and asking them to defend your life with their own - trusting them to keep you safe and see you home at the end of a 365-day trip into the unknown.

Choosing the Alpha Dog

The members of the current PTT team were first introduced at a two month training course at Fort Dix, N.J. It was there the beginnings of their deployed family took shape.

"That first day when everyone was arriving it felt like basic training - people coming in at all hours of the day and night," said Sergeant King, an 11-year veteran from Gulfport, Miss. "When we woke up the next day to start training, it was like staring out at a bunch of strangers."

Before long, though, the group, primarily made up of men, began sizing each other up.

"Very quickly the general questions started," he said. "Quickly it became clear that we were all a bunch of 'Alpha Dogs' trying to see how much other people knew and how much we had up on the next person."

That Alpha Dog syndrome, however, didn't deter the Airmen from the task at hand: learning what their mission would be while deployed and training to become a cohesive team.

"When most people come together there's usually those steps you need to go through - storming, forming, norming and performing," Sergeant King noted. "But with us, we just hit the ground running; it was like we just were perfectly matched together and all our differences balanced out the weaknesses without much effort on our part. I don't know if that was by design or our own dumb luck, but it worked out."

While typically most groups have a hard time getting someone to take the lead, this group had no problem with that. These Airmen proved early on that their experiences and knowledge were what set them apart.

"Most people would look at me and expect as a senior airman that I have no authority or control over what we do here," said Senior Airman George Brodish, a security forces Airman deployed from Ellsworth AFB, S.D. "But the leadership allows us to use our previous experience dealing with the Iraqis to conduct training while they handle the politics and paperwork. It's not often that you get an opportunity to prove yourself beyond your rank."

Some members are on their second rotation with the PTT team, while others have served in Iraq on previous deployments in other capacities. In either case, the team draws on their wealth of information and experience to accomplish their mission. The Airmen use this knowledge to fine-tune training techniques and mission protocols. By allowing everyone to offer their opinions and suggestions, the team is able to make the mission their own.

"This bunch of Airmen is very talented," Sergeant King said. "When you give them a project, they don't just do what you asked but they put their mark on it. They have done that at every single point of this deployment."

The trust factor

For this brotherhood-in-arms, the feeling that PTT Airmen were part of a team - unified through experience and a common goal - was obvious. They had already begun bonding and had inside jokes. But one day, shortly after arriving in Iraq, the team realized that they were bonded by more than just laughter and geography. One day they learned that they trusted each other, too.

Only two weeks into their turnover, Flight 3 Squad 2 was visiting their sector's Iraqi Police Station. Still tentative toward the Iraqis, the Airmen focused on filling in gaps in the IPs training when an explosion rocked the foundation of the building. Within moments, a call came over the radio: "I see smoke."

"We thought something hit the station because it shook the building with such force," Sergeant King said. "Immediately, we began checking on our guys through radio contact. An IP confirmed that a VBIED (vehicle borne improvised explosive device) had struck in a nearby muhalla (neighborhood)."

The PTT team loaded their vehicles and responded to the scene with the IPs. As the first responders to the scene, the Airmen were immediately affected by the chaos that ensued in the wake of the explosion.

"Dead bodies and body parts, injured people and glass and debris were everywhere. Right then you could sense that everyone wanted to grab the CLS (combat lifesaver) bags and save the people," Sergeant King said. "But then the training kicked in and the TCs (truck commanders) ordered a security perimeter set up."

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U.S. Air Force Senior Airman George Brodish, a Security Forces Airman assigned to the 732nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron Det. 3, advises and trains Iraqi Police May 11, 2009, in Baghdad. Airman Brodish is deployed from Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Staff Sgt. Shawn Weismiller)

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For the sergeant, everything seemed to slow down for a moment as the scene sunk in and he realized that he was responding to an act of terrorism with a horrific aftermath.

"At that moment, I thought, 'We're here in Baghdad. This is definitely happening.' That's when the experience and training took over," said the sergeant. "People knew their roles and their reactions were textbook."

Because the PTT Almen had learned how to respond as team during training and in-theater drills, an immediate and effective response resulted. Some looked for watchers while others looked for a secondary method of attack. The team notified the "landowners," the U.S. Army forces responsible for the physical area of the attack, and called in air support and explosive ordnance disposal teams, while the Iraqi Police dispatched extra personnel to bolster security at the site. The Almen set up a perimeter and provided first aid as needed.

"This is when the trust factor came in," Sergeant King said. "We knew the people we were with could take care of themselves and knew their job. Everyone fell right into their natural roles resulting in immediate reaction. No one suffered from tunnel vision."

After returning to FOB Falcon, the team held an open forum after action report. It was during the round-table discussions that something became clear to everyone on patrol: things could have turned out very different.

"Hearing everyone talk I realized that anything could have happened," Sergeant King said. "We kept running through the 'it-could-have-been-us' possibilities and I knew right then that I was with the best trained group yet. I knew that I could trust the people on my squad."

Wartime family

In the ensuing weeks and months, the Almen learned to lean on each other for more than training and security. During missions outside the base, mounting up in the convoys became times to check up on one another.

"That's where brotherhood came in," Sergeant King said. "Once we would get inside the vehicle and put our headsets on, everyone would start talking - big brother, little brother stuff."

The Almen, who are broken up in to squads, rotate between vehicles. This not only helps keep people from becoming complacent but also helps build rapport within the entire squad.

"These guys have become so close that if I tried to separate them, I think I'd have a grenade thrown under my desk," joked Capt. Matt Ballanco, 732nd ESFS S3 operations officer. "They aren't just on the same squad; they're a tight-knit family."

Conversations always start the same way: "What do you think ..." or "What's your opinion on this ..."

"Listening to each other, you start to build a relationship," Sergeant King said. "In the end, the advice you're giving is something personal, genuine. It helps when you have a problem and you have no direction that you can talk to someone who's probably been there before."

The squads have become so close, they've transcended just being good "wingmen"; they're now part of a family.

"We all have different personalities," Sergeant King said. "You get to know someone really well through the talking and you come to know what to expect. When someone isn't acting right or isn't talking, you know you need to look out for them."

With three months left on their tour, the group is already planning their next big get together.

"One of the guys is getting married and we're all going," Sergeant King said. "This deployment is coming to an end and we're all going home but I don't think any of us will forget the family we became."

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