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Deployment of an Assault Helicopter Battalion

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CSM 1st Battalion 131st Aviation Regiment

The 1st Battalion 131st Aviation Regiment mobilized and deployed in support of (ISO) OIF 06-08 as a member of the 36th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB). The battalion mission was to provide aviation support to Multi National Corp Iraq. I was assigned as the battalion Command Sergeant Major. This was the first time an entire National Guard CAB had ever been assembled. Many unique challenges would face our organization in the coming months. Many of these challenges included personnel, equipment, and training.

MOBILIZATION

The Battalion advance party arrived at FT Hood, TX on 14 February 2006. The main body arrived on 27 March 2006. The battalion assets include six organic companies consisting of a Headquarters Company, three Flight Companies, an AVUM Maintenance Company, and a Forward Support Company. The Battalions 30 UH-60A Blackhawk helicopters were self deployed from Alabama and Arkansas during the same time frame.

Five companies including the battalion headquarters came from the state of Alabama. The other company (Charlie) assigned to our battalion came from the state of Arkansas. Previous collective training events the battalion completed had not included Charlie Company. This caused Charlie Company to be very slow integrating with the Battalion.

During the six months at FT Hood it was a constant struggle juggling individual training requirements with MOS and collective training. The task of completing the required IED Lane training, weapons training and Forward Operating Base training in the summer heat of FT, Hood

strained our soldiers' ability to focus and stay motivated. The battalion requirement for 100% completion of Theater Specific Individual Training was completed in mid August. The collective aviation tasks were completed near the end of July. Our final collective training event prior to deployment did not receive positive remarks from the evaluation team.. Prior to departing for Kuwait my greatest concern was, could we accomplish the mission? Were our soldiers and equipment prepared for the task before us? As a National Guard aviation battalion we would fly between 3,000 and 3,500 flight hours during an average year. We had been told to expect to fly 20,000 hours during our 12 month deployment. The six months at FT Hood has exhausted our soldiers. The actual deployment had not even started.

The Battalion advance party departed FT, Hood in early August. The rest of the Battalion was given block leave the last two weeks of August. This was only the second time to see my wife and children since the 13th of February 2006. It was very difficult to return to FT, Hood knowing the challenges in front of me.

DEPLOYMENT

The battalion arrived at Camp Buehring Kuwait on 01 Sep 06. The primary focus in Kuwait was Aviation environmental training and more individual training. Kuwait proved to be quite a leadership challenge. The extreme heat, logistical challenges, communication and soldier issues made even the simple tasks hard. This was the mental low point for me. The realization of still having one more year of deployment was very hard to deal with. I did realize I needed to be strong and was being looked at by all the enlisted soldiers and NCOs'. Having the responsibility

of leadership assisted me in looking forward and not to dwell on things out of my control. With all required tasks completed the battalions 30 UH-60A Blackhawks were soon ready to fly into Iraq. The battalion main body arrived at LSA Anaconda in Balad, Iraq on the 17th of Sep 06.

Our battalion was to replace the 4th battalion 101st Aviation Brigade. I met with their battalion CSM just after arrival to get an orientation and a list of tasking. The list of Force Protection requirements was very extensive. It would take twenty-two soldiers a day out of the fight. The other key leaders met with there replacements to ensure a seamless transition occurred.

Orientation flights began immediately. Gradually day after day our Battalion began picking up more missions from 4/101. On the 28th of Sep the relief in place and transfer of authority was completed.

Success for an Assault Helicopter Aviation Battalion can be defined as missions taking off on time with safe aircraft being flown by qualified crews; for this to be sustained the effort of my senior NCO's in the flight and maintenance companies was critical. Maintaining the optempo required twenty-four hour operations. This requirement stretched the enlisted soldiers very thin. I had great confidence in my flight and maintenance company First Sergeants to manage this task. Looking back it was not my First Sergeants that were the most important NCOs. The most critical NCOs' in the organization were my E-7 Platoon Sergeants. They had to juggle maintenance, flight duties and crew rest. These three duties were equally critical for "Mission Success"

I had the most personnel issues from the Forward Support Company (FSC) and Headquarters Company (HHC) soldiers. This was a two fold problem. The soldiers in HHC and the FSC had more spare time than the flight and maintenance companies and were tasked with 90% of the Force Protection requirements, these included duties at guard towers and entry control points. Management of this task became one of my most challenging events. The lower enlisted soldiers did not understand this requirement and believed the flight personnel were being given special treatment. On several occasions I would have an open forum meeting with the enlisted soldiers allowing them to express there opinions. The majority of the time I couldn't fix their issues, but I do think they felt better knowing I would listen.

It took about two months for the battalion to get its rhythm. I then began to relax a bit, my question of can we do this mission was answered; we were excelling at what we do. The aircraft and crews were performing great, HHC, FSC, and the BN staffs were all working as one.

On the 20th of January 2007 my greatest concern became a reality. Word came thru the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) that one of our aircraft had crashed with no survivors. We had just lost four great soldiers including a Staff Sergeant, one of my First Sergeants and his Company Commander. The lost crew was from Charlie Company (Arkansas). The next day flight crews from Charlie Company launched missions as usual. The grit and determination soldiers have is unbelievable. The Warrior Ethos was never expressed more than what the soldiers of the 1/131st Aviation Regiment did during this tragic time.

By early summer the end was in sight. We had been given a mid August departure date. Soldiers began to have something to look forward to. The most common word my NCO's spoke was complacency, we continued to warn the enlisted of letting this happen. As a leader I could see all the warning signs, no matter how much we talked about being complacent it was still occurring. I had several soldiers receive minor injuries from simple accidents. My NCO's had to be tougher on soldiers near the end of the deployment than the beginning. During our weekly staff meetings our Battalion Commander would stress the number of days left to die not the number of days until the Transfer of Authority (TOA).

The battalion main body departed LSA Anaconda on 07 Aug 07, the TOA was completed with the 12th Aviation Battalion on 16 Aug 07. Mission complete!

REDEPLOYMENT

On the 22nd of August 2007 I returned to my wife and children for just the third time in almost twenty months. Many changes need to occur to enhance the future mobilizations of National Guard aviation. The greatest change needs to be the duration of deployment. The next greatest change needs to be a focus on tailoring mobilization training to the unit being mobilized. My soldiers spent too much time training on things they never saw, and too little time training on aviation tasks.

Mobilization training for National Guard units did change. Now individual training is completed at home station and only eight to ten weeks are spent at the mobilization site with the focus on collective aviation training.

I learned many valuable lessons during this deployment. The single greatest obstacle an Aviation Battalion can have is untrained soldiers. NCO's must ensure no training time is wasted during IDT periods. Mobilization is not the time to teach basic MOS skills it is the time to polish those skills.

In the end the 36th CAB proved to be one of the most successful aviation organizations ever sent into combat. The 1st battalion 131st Aviation Regiment received the Meritorious Unit Citation for its accomplishments during OIF 06-08. Some awards and decorations soldiers of the battalion received include the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, and The Air Medal. More than 60 soldiers received the Combat Action Badge for their engagements with the enemy.