

Combat care on the fly

Pilots, medics say they're honored by medevac mission

By Kelly Kennedy

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TAQADDUM, Iraq — At a late-night barbecue next to a fleet of Black Hawk helicopters, pilots and medics told the usual tall tales.

This time, drawing creativity from near beers rather than true bar nectar, the stories proved to be true.

The guys — and one woman — on the midnight medevac shift of the 45th Medical Company out of Katterback, Germany, for the 29th Marine Air Group here, did not originally aspire to save lives by air. Some have flamboyant backgrounds, including a pilot who once jumped with the Army's Golden Knights parachute team, but they all say they're right where they want to be now.

"It makes for a really qualified team," said Capt. Bradley Kistler, the unit's commander.

The unit, made up of three crews with four people per aircraft, flies two or three missions a night, each with a Cobra gunship escort. When a call comes in, they're off the ground within 10 minutes.

Kistler is the first example of the unit's varied back story. He began as a tanker, then went into preventive medicine as an officer via the Green-to-Gold program. Then he found out he could fly.

"I didn't even know medical officers could be pilots," he said.

His background as a tanker has stayed with him, though. "I don't forget what it's like to be knee-deep in the mud," he said.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Harley Mast started out in the infantry. He was in the 82nd Airborne Division when he realized he wanted to be a Golden Knight, so he began practicing free-fall jumps. He left the military for college, but realized he missed it, and came back in as a medic. He rejoined the Golden Knights, then applied for his pilot's license and the warrant officer spot.

"I'm honored more than anything to be medevac," he said, a thought voiced by nearly everyone on the team. "We have a real-time mission, and it's nice to know what we do works."

Even the junior enlisted troops have strange career paths. Spc. Barethea Hicks, the only female, handles flight operations for the teams. She started out as a cook, but "didn't like the hours," then moved to personnel, but that position was contracted out. She finally



PHOTOS BY RICK KOZAK/STAFF

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Frank Barrale, a pilot for the 45th Medical Company (Air Ambulance), washes down a Black Hawk after the night's missions at Forward Operating Base Taqaddum.



Capt. Brad Kistler, commanding officer of 45th Medical Company (Air Ambulance) talks about his company's mission.

ly reclassified in flight operations.

But just as she began to explain why the medevac gig was more rewarding than she expected, a mission popped up.

Suddenly, near beers and half-eaten burgers hit the garbage as pilots and medics grabbed their gear and ran out the door to crank up their helicopters.

At first, they had two birds ready to go — one for a point-of-injury pickup, which means landing outside the wire to pick up a patient where he's fallen.

This soldier had shrapnel behind his ear, apparently from an enemy grenade. The pilots would fly him back to Taqaddum to the Level II

Navy surgical center — a five-minute flight — where doctors would stabilize him, and then, the same evening, send him by medevac to the Level III hospital in Baghdad, 45 minutes away by air.

A Level II surgical center has the same equipment as a state-side trauma center, and the doctors there perform emergency surgery only. A Level III hospital provides longer-term care and more specialized surgeries for patients before they're sent back to their units in Iraq or to the Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, for further care.

The second patient had a fever and needed to be moved from

Taqaddum to Baghdad. Rather than send out two birds and limit their resources — they never know when another call will come — they sent one helicopter, flown by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Frank Barrale, to the point-of-injury call. When he returned to Taqaddum, he would pick up the patient with the fever and deliver him to Baghdad.

Barrale joined the military as a fire support specialist, then re-enlisted to fly a scout helicopter. In 1990, he could do that as an enlisted man. But soon, he realized there might be more benefits to earning warrant officer bars. His last mission involved flying VIPs in Germany. Tonight's mission was decidedly different.

He circled over the river and into what looked like, in the dead of night, a farmer's field. But as he lowered the Black Hawk to the ground, a cloud of dust so thick it looked like smoke surrounded the helicopter. He lifted up to circle around again.

In the air, instruments can easily guide a pilot blinded by clouds or darkness. But if he can't physically see the ground when he's landing, too many things can go wrong, and Barrale wouldn't take the chance. He circled and tried to land four more times as a team of soldiers on the ground waited

with their injured man.

When the dust subsided enough to put down, six men emerged from the darkness with a litter carrying a soldier whose head was heavily bandaged. Without a word, they loaded him into the helicopter, and then ran off into the darkness.

Barrale lifted off, and Sgt. Matthew Mursinna went to work ensuring the patient was as comfortable as possible and his vital signs were good. Mursinna, whose favorite phrase may be "Rock on," said that in his previous job as a line medic, he watched flight medics continue his work on the wounded, and decided he wanted to try it. "It's an honor," he said. "I love it."

Five minutes later, the crew landed at Taqaddum. Another team hit the helipad, grabbed the patient with the head wound and loaded the man with the fever. In 45 minutes, the team was in Baghdad, handing off the sick soldier at the hospital, grabbing cold water and heading back to the helicopter.

By the time they got back to base, it was 3 a.m. They always hope the next mission won't come, but if it does, they know they're ready for anything.

"No matter what, this mission is right and just," Kistler said. "It doesn't matter what the politics are." □