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Medical Field Reports From Iraq Part III: On Constant Alert

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UH-60 Blackhawk 170 and Sabbagh, NVG image by Cpt. Heath Holt, Flight Platoon Leader

During her tour of military medical facilities, she is filing blog entries for popularmechanics.com. To read her previous dispatches, [click here](#).

June 19—Our tour continues today with Eagle Dustoff, 50th Medical Company Air Ambulance, 101st Airborne Assault Division, Camp Cooke, Taji, Iraq. The roadside medevac missions have, thank God, slowed significantly in the week I've been here. The Iraqi National Guard has been taking most of the hits. These wounded troops are treated just as if they were American casualties—from the medevac through treatment at the Combat Support Hospital (CSH).

Sunday afternoon the call comes for a priority flight: a 10-year-old Iraqi male, transport from the CSH to the Air Force hospital in Balad 40 miles north of the city. He's a typical young boy, except that he's a little thin and his face is pinched and too serious for his age. He walks slowly to the helicopter pad. And when he sees the Blackhawk, with the crew chief (CE) standing in full armor by the door, he looks awed. His father and I climb into the back seats and the medics lift him into the front center seat. That's the last we see of him until we land at Balad 25 minutes later. When he exited the helicopter, he looked like a new kid—still a little shy but way proud. Hand waving, he chattered happily to his father as they walked to the waiting ground medics.

Later, I get the mother of all passenger briefings from Sgt. Trevor Twite. He shows me five different ways to climb in and out of the Blackhawk's windows and doors, and how to use the crash axe. I practice buckling the four-point harness until I can do it with my eyes closed. Then he shows me the fire extinguishers, first-aid kits, and where to stash the shoulder straps for easy access.

My seat, the center troop position, faces aft and is sandwiched between the CE and MO (medic) seats that face the right and left sides of the helicopter. These chairs collapse in case of a hard landing, which means nothing should be under them—including legs.

During the lull last night, Instructor Pilot Chief Warrant Officer 3 Gary Murphy gives CW2 Rees a lesson in Night Vision Goggles (NVG) flight. MO Morris and CE Simons fix me up with a pair of these \$20,000 beauties and my first look is breathtaking. The night opens and I can see forever. Row after row of Blackhawks and Apaches morph from indistinct, looming hulks into perfectly visible dark green helicopters on the light green flight line. Pole lights and headlamps turn into mini-novas with glowing halos. But learning to fly wearing NVGs isn't so magical—they narrow peripheral vision and shallow depth of perception. Pilots need to practice approaches and landings to get a feel for where the ground is. So we lift up and fly patterns and landings.

Around 3:00 am, Cpt. Heath Holt takes glowing green images of Blackhawks through the NVGs by holding his tiny digital camera up to the goggles after he's focused them on the helos.

June 20—Around noon the wail of a siren fills the air. It is a huge, scary impossibly loud noise. It goes on and on, then stops. A few seconds later it starts again. We head for bunkers, and the word is that Camp Taji Base Defense Operations Center detected mortar attacks on the camp. We sit on rough benches in a hot, hot bunker for close to an hour. Then over the radio comes "All clear."—*Leslie Sabbagh*