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Medical Field Reports From Iraq Part IV: They Get It Done



From left: Staff Sgt. Macomber, Cpt. Guillermina Marie Castillo, Pfc. Duran, Maj. McClellan, Staff Sgt. Flote, PHOTOS BY LESLIE SABBAGH

PM Contributing Editor Leslie Sabbagh is currently on assignment in Iraq. During her tour of military medical facilities, she is filing blog entries for popularmechanics.com. To read her previous dispatches, [click here](#).



Spc. Raymond Hendricks (left) adjusts the Blackhawk's pitch control rod while Spc. Joshua replaces the engine fuel filter.

CAMP COOKE, Taji, Iraq, June 24—Mornings here can be deceptive. Take today, for example, at 0600: a gentle cool breeze, soft blue sky and delicious 80°. If it weren't for the guard towers, circling gunships and hundreds of M4- and M16-toting soldiers, you'd think it was an early summer day in northeast Ohio. But this won't last. By 1030 we'll be back under the broiler.

Before the day turns too hot, I wander over to one of the [FOB's](#) aid stations to visit Capt. Guillermina Marie Castillo, a physician's assistant with the aviation brigade. The clinic provides acute medical care to all soldiers of that unit. In case there's a mass casualty, the clinic also provides stop-gap emergency medical care. And one more thing—the staff acts as medical referees for Camp Cooke's wildly popular Taji fight night. Word on the base is that an officers vs. enlisted fight is in the works. If I'm not flying, I'll be ringside.

BLACKHAWKS 101

"They're a bunch of smartasses but I wouldn't trade them for any other soldiers." This from Capt. Scott Brown, maintenance pilot, 50th Medical Company Air Ambulance 101st Airborne Assault Division. He's bragging about the 32 men in his platoon: electrical, avionics, airframe, engine, hydraulics, prop and rotor mechanics. It's upward of 120° and these guys are inspecting tail rotor gearboxes, working on main rotor dampers, and adjusting pitch control rods.

The platoon handles all the maintenance for 12 UH-60 A Blackhawk medevac helicopters—and you can bet it's not easy. Helicopters are notoriously high-maintenance: one flying hour equals 10 hours of maintenance, but it's even tougher with these birds. They average 20 years; all the airframes have more than 4000 hours on them; and the engines are old. Now add the stressors of medevac flying in an insanely hot, dirty combat zone with aircraft underpowered for their armored weight and you'll know why Brown and Staff Sgt. Ken Abbott, production control commanding officer and acting platoon sergeant for maintenance platoon, swear by their mechanics. "We haven't had a mission that had to be cancelled, dropped or denied due to aircraft maintenance," says Abbott.

These aircraft aren't immune from battle damage though. Four of them took hits during this tour of [OIF III](#) from one [VBIED](#), one IED and two small-arms firings.—*Leslie Sabbagh*