

July 11, 2005

Medical Field Reports From Iraq Part VII: The Night Shift



CW2 Patterson, Spc. Myers, WO1 Parker, S. Sgt. Miller. EAGLE DUSTOFF 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](#).



CW2 Gordon, Sgt. Brown, Spc. Mendoza, CW3 Horton.



Sandstorm on the flightline. PHOTO BY SPC SAM SIMONS

CAMP COOKE, Taji, Iraq, July 3--The rhythm of night flights are different here at the base. Things are quieter than during the day, and the bosses are gone. By 2130, there are only two flight crews and two guys in flight ops until 0600 the next morning. The attitude and talk is a little more casual. Crews watch television, read, communicate through e-mail and VOIP.

All that changes, though, when the [9-lines](#) come in. At launch, everything ratchets up a little higher at night. Missions, even routine ones, become more tense. And roadside pickups are another animal entirely when the sun goes down. If visibility keeps the Apaches at home, then already heightened senses kick into overdrive for the Blackhawk crews.

My first crew--pilots Chief Warrant Officer 3 John Horton and CW2 Troy Gordon, medic Sgt. Gary Brown and crew chief Spc. Tony Mendoza--have an easy night of it. No roadsides, just an [FOB](#) pickup for transfer to the prison at Abu Ghraib. The doctors make us wait at least an hour for the actual pickup, in diminishing weather. When we finally launch, the visibility is at its minimum for this type of mission.

July 4--We get hit by another sand/dust storm and go to red. That means none of the birds at Camp Cooke, Taji, Iraq, will be flying. But the crews welcome this slower pace from the normally hectic daily routine.

July 5--The visibility is good today, so the company celebrates yesterday's Independence Day. Missions are flown as usual, but the administrative element is relaxed and the crews enjoy a barbecue, movies and games.

Tonight I'm flying with CW2 Carlos Patterson, WO1 Craig Parker, S. Sgt. Marcus Miller and Spc. Billy Myers. Just after the extensive preflight check, about 2030, we're hanging around flight ops when the call comes. It's a roadside, a little bit north of our base, Camp Cooke. It sounds bad, three casualties all urgent. Myers and Parker race out to the Blackhawk, and I wait with command pilot Patterson and medic Miller for their okay to fly. When there are multiple casualties sometimes the ground units don't have the exact number, and there isn't room for me. I get the okay from Miller and we launch four minutes after the [9-line](#).

We get there in two minutes. The LZ (landing zone) is between two roads, a dusty patch of terrain that turns the landing into a brownout. The site is more rural than not, with scattered rundown trucks and crumbling homes and businesses. There are too many locals walking around. The Apaches, Death Stalker 36 and Death Stalker 06, are at the site pulling overhead security. I see them circling the PZ (pickup zone), close and protective. There are six HMMVs, one overturned, and two M-1 Abrams tanks. One HMMV is at our nose, another at the 2 o'clock position. Then the two M-1s come racing past us and position themselves about 150 meters out in front.

The litter bearers run up with the first casualty; he's got a tracheal tube inserted. Then Miller helps load the second. Both are urgent surgical cases, the most serious [9-line](#) trauma. The pilots fly a different route into the Combat Surgical Hospital, and I don't recognize the landmarks until we're into the city, five minutes later. The medics rush out from the hospital and Miller transfers care of his patients. Just the two; a third was [KIA](#).--Leslie Sabbagh