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## Abstract

My personnel experience paper is written about my experience while deployed for OIF 28 Feb 07 – 28 Aug 07. I was deployed as part of a 4 man Military Transition Team (MiTT). The first part of my paper will discuss the events leading up to my deployment the middle part will talk about my experience while deployed. I will conclude with the insight I gained after my deployment.

From 4 Mar 07 – 28 Aug 07 I was assigned as a member of the 360<sup>th</sup> Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, Camp Taji Iraq. Our mission was to train the fledgling Iraq Air Force in modern helicopter tactics and training methods. The primary mission of tactical training was given to the USAF. While the mission of establishing an Iraq Air Force training program fell on the Army. The Iraq Air Force at Camp Taji consisted of three squadrons, two operational squadrons and one training squadron. Since the USAF receives its rotary wing training from the Army it was decided that the Army would be in charge of advising the 12<sup>th</sup> squadron which was to become the Iraq Air Force Training Squadron. This was to be done under the watchful eye of the USAF.

I first heard about this mission in early 2004 from my then Battalion Commander. He told me about the mission and what kind of soldiers they were looking for. The requirements were fairly stringent, for the enlisted side they were looking for an E-7/8 15V ITC qualified with platform time instructing both officer and enlisted in OH-58A/C maintenance practices. They also needed to be very knowledgeable in aircraft systems. On the officer side they wanted an Instructor Pilot (IP) O4/O5 who was current in touchdown auto rotations. Both the officer and enlisted position would be filled by the Arizona Army National Guard.

These requirements severely limited the number of qualified soldiers. On the officer side it came down to three candidates and seven on the enlisted side. At the time I was the assistant commandant at the Western ARNG Aviation Training Site (WAATS). In this position I was in charge of all the enlisted instructors so I was asked to provide the names of all qualified soldiers who were willing to volunteer for this mission. I gathered all my qualified instructors in our conference room told them what I knew of the missions and asked if there were any volunteers.

I only had one volunteer, all the others said that they would be willing to go if ordered to but were unwilling to volunteer for a one year assignment due to family.

Armed with this information I went to brief my commander. I told him of the volunteer and the reason the others had not volunteered. At this time, I also told him that I met all of the requirements and that I would like to volunteer myself. We then had a conversation about who would be the best suited for the job volunteer or not. We came up with a list of three enlisted soldiers including myself. At this point it was still undecided on which officer would be going but it was between my commander and our maintenance test pilot.

A few days later my commander called me in his office and told me that they were going to send our maintenance test pilot and the instructor who had originally volunteered. He wanted me to know that he felt that I was the most qualified enlisted guy for the job and that if it had been him going I would have been going with him. He then told me that for that same selfish reason he was keeping me back with him. I was disappointed that I was not going but at the same time I had a lot of respect for my commander and knew that he had given me an honest reason for keeping me with him.

In the summer of 2004 the first team went off to perform their mission. In talking with my instructor we found out that they were not given any clear objectives to a successful mission. Their plan was to get there assess the situation and come up with their own goals to success. When they first arrived at Taji they found that none of the 12<sup>th</sup> squadron's aircraft were there. They learned that there were three Augusta Bell 206 Jet Rangers and two Bell Jet Rangers and that all five had been gifted to the Iraq Air Force by the United Arab Emirates and that all five were currently in Bagdad.

They then came up with their goals. First get the aircraft to Taji, second establish an Iraq Air Force maintenance record keeping system, third establish historical records for the aircraft, fourth establish a logistics system for parts, tools and support equipment and finally establish some type of training program for the Iraq maintainers. Over the course of the next year they went about successfully meeting all of those goals. By the end of the year they had maintenance and historical records for all five aircraft. They had about 1.5 million dollars of repair parts on order and all twenty two of the Iraq mechanics had been given at least a familiarization class on the Bell 206 Jet Ranger.

When the first team's year was up, it was decided to let the Air Force take over the mission, so no follow on teams were scheduled. It did not take long for the Air Force to determine that this mission was better suited to the army so they requested that the army send a replacement team. My unit was again given the mission and was told to send a four man team for six months to be followed by a second four man team six months later. I was identified to be a member of the second four man team.

In February 2007 I found myself at Ft. Bliss Texas going through a five day MOB. On March 4 2007 my team consisting of one CW4 maintenance test pilot/IP, one CW3 IP and two ITC qualified 15V enlisted soldiers reached Camp Taji. We had planned on doing about seven days of right seat left seat hand off with the team we were replacing but upon arrival we learned that they would be departing in two days.

The next morning we got to meet our Iraq counterparts for the first time. I was not sure what to expect but quickly learned that communication was going to be a huge road block to training. Most of the Iraq mechanics spoke very limited English and could not read English at all. The problem this posed for us is that all the maintenance manuals are written in English.

Despite these obstacles we managed to provide some pretty decent mentoring over the next six months.

Overall I would have to say that we were successful in our mission to train the Iraq Air Force 12<sup>th</sup> Squadron. We managed to get all five aircraft flyable at one time and we had enough Iraq crews trained to fly all five in a formation flight. This was a big deal for the Iraq Air Force and even the coalition forces on the other side of base took notice of this flight. It was the first time since the start of the war that they were able to fly that many aircraft at one time.

Soon after this historic day my team was given a going away party by our Iraq counterparts. They made us a traditional meal and we shared memories and accomplishments. I was glad to be going home but at the same time I was a little down about leaving. We had developed friendships with most of the Iraq soldiers we trained and it felt a little like we were leaving them behind.

During our time at Taji we were encouraged by our command to spend as much time with our Iraq counterparts as possible. This was a tuff pill for us to swallow. We were putting in long hours and any time off was precious to us. We set aside two nights a week and dubbed them "Iraq fun night". During these evenings we would talk with the Iraq soldiers and learn about their families, religious beliefs and just get to know them. We had both Shiite and Zuni counterparts which was interesting to me. I tried to learn the differences between the two but honestly those differences still elude me. The soldiers of the 12<sup>th</sup> considered themselves a family and us a part of it.

One of the things I learned about these soldiers was that most of them hid what they did from their families. They did this out of fear for their families and for themselves. They were afraid their children would talk while playing in the neighborhood and that the bad guys would

find out what dad did. They had to sneak onto and off of Taji even though they were very proud of what they were doing. One of the mechanics told me that when his wife asked him where he went for weeks at a time that he told her he had a second wife and family that he split his time between. This was easier for him to explain than that he was serving his country placing himself and his entire family in danger from the insurgents.

Several of these soldiers had family members kidnapped during the time I was there and a few had family members killed. This happened either because the insurgents thought they were friendly to the Americans or knew that they were. Some were killed simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When I got home I had to relocate my family due to a reassignment. My wife had worked for Jim Click Automotive Group for ten years and was going to be quitting due to our relocation. Mr. Click has a monthly luncheon with employees that are reaching some type of mile stone in their career with his company. My wife wanted to go to the meeting and thank him for the ten years of employment he had provided her. He was a great boss and was always very supportive of the military and any of his employees that had spouses in the military.

On the day of the meeting my wife called me and asked me to go with her. She wanted to hang out in the back of the room and when Mr. Click was done with all his presentations she would just go up to him, thank him, and then we were going to leave and go have lunch. It is important to note that Mr. Click owns eight or nine dealerships in Tucson and has over 600 employees. Stephanie and I arrived about ten minutes after the meeting started and the room was rather full. Stephanie found a chair in the back of the room near a little alcove and I was hiding behind a wall trying to stay out of site.

After about ten more minutes the meeting was coming to an end and Mr. Click was wrapping up his comments and he looked directly at Stephanie and asked if there was anyone else that had anything to put out before lunch was served. Somehow he just knew that she had something to tell him. At this point he called her to the front and started to tell the group a little about her and her family. He proceeded to tell everyone about her children and he knew each Child's name. I was amazed that he knew so much about one of his employees when he has so many. He then started talking about my wife's husband who was deployed, at that point someone pointed out that they thought they had seen her husband in the back of the room.

At this point my hiding came to an end as Mr. Click demanded that I join him and my wife at the front. As I was walking to the front Mr. Click learned from my wife that I was now home for good and he proceeded to let the group know. It was at this point that I realized that I was receiving a standing ovation from the group gathered in the room. I was somewhat embarrassed by this and did not feel it was deserved. My wife then proceeded to let Mr. Click know that she was leaving and that she was thankful for the ten years of employment. He was genuinely sorry to see her leave and told her that if we ever moved back to Tucson that she had a job waiting. I then spent the next 30 minutes or so being thanked for my service.

As my wife and I were eating lunch a little while later I thought about the differences between myself and my Iraq counterparts. We both serve our country because we feel it's the right thing to do. We serve proudly and know that we are doing our part to defend our countries and make it a better place to live. The difference is that I can walk proudly down the street and receive thanks from my fellow citizens, my children go to school and talk about their dad who is in the army without fear of reprisal and people support our soldiers even if they don't support the war.

It was then that I realized that our soldiers are doing good things over there even if they are going unnoticed. It doesn't matter if initially we went there for the right reasons or not we have an obligation to stick it out until the Iraq people can defend themselves. I hope that someday soon those Iraq soldiers that I helped train can walk proudly down the street in their uniforms and receive the thanks they deserve from their fellow countrymen.