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Air Force's Role Changing in Iraq

Associated Press | January 03, 2006



AN AIR BASE IN KUWAIT - U.S. Airmen are increasingly on the ground in Iraq, driving in convoys and even working with detainees - a shift in the Air Force's historic mission that military officials call necessary to bolster the strapped Army.

The main aerial hub for the war in Iraq has 1,500 airmen doing convoy operations in Iraq and 1,000 working with detainees, training Iraqis and performing other activities not usually associated with the Air Force, said Col. Tim Hale, commander of the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing.

"Every one of us has learned that we are in a nontraditional state in our armed forces," he said, standing outside an auditorium at an air base in Kuwait.

The dangers of the new roles were highlighted when the expeditionary wing lost its first female member in the line of duty in Iraq. Airman 1st Class Elizabeth Jacobson, 21, was killed in a roadside bombing while providing convoy security in September near the U.S. detention center at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq.

"More and more Air Force are doing Army jobs," said Senior Master Sgt. Matt Rossoni, 46, of San Francisco. "It's nothing bad about the Army. They're just tapped out."

Air Force security forces are traditionally associated with base defense. But Chief Master Sgt. Tom McDaniel, 41, of Winston-Salem, N.C., said his squadron is happy to provide security for patrols and to deliver supplies.

"It's all about getting the mission done," he said. "These are different roles we find ourselves in . . . This is probably the forefront of things to come."

The Navy is seeing the same trend, using its fighter aircraft to escort convoys and protect oil infrastructure and sending sailors in boats to contact fishermen from Saudi Arabia and even Iran for tips on terror suspects.

"In the last three or four years we've done a lot more of that," Rear Adm. James A. Winnefeld, commander of Carrier Strike Group 2, said aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt.

The Air Force also is keeping up with its traditional duties.

In November, the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing delivered its 1 millionth passenger to Iraq since October 2003, Hale told service members gathered Monday for a holiday concert with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace.

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Those missions included transporting troops, casualties and cargo flights.

The Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps flew thousands of missions in support of U.S. ground troops in Iraq this fall, including attacks by unmanned Predator aircraft armed with Hellfire missiles, military records show. American and allied refueling, transport and surveillance planes also are in the air.

Airstrikes have been largely in areas where the insurgency is strongest, like Balad, Ramadi and in the vicinity of Baghdad, according to the U.S. Central Command.

At least 2,179 members of the U.S. military have died since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

Brig. Gen. Allen G. Peck, deputy commander of American air forces in the Middle East, said that while the U.S. has been focusing on training Iraqi ground forces, it also is helping Iraqis improve their air force, giving them training and C-130 cargo planes.

The Iraqis have about 50 aircraft and some 700 people trained in the air force, among some 180,000 security forces overall, he said at an air base near Qatar.

"It's relatively small right now, but it's getting bigger," he said.

Peck said the near-term focus was training in maintenance, reconnaissance, transport and counterinsurgency tactics, but the Iraqis also should eventually become capable of defending their own air space.

"It's not a matter of months, but a matter of years," he said. "We're moving in the right direction."

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