

101st Combat Aviation Brigade

Official Publication

No Mercy Eagle Assault Shadow Of The Eagle Trouble Shooters Out Front



Hellcats Dragon Killer Spades Arctic Cowboys Buccaneers

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WINGS OF DESTINY MAGAZINE

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE 101ST COMBAT AVIATION BRIGADE

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From the Editor

Air Assault and welcome to another edition of *Wings of Destiny* magazine. This issue focuses on Operation Swarmer, the largest Air Assault since the initial invasion of Iraq, and the brigade's involvement in that mission. The issue features several photographs chronicling the mission as seen from the air and on the ground.

Also in this issue we take a look at the outstanding support a unit, the 542nd Medical Company, has received from back home, particularly the state of Illinois, and how the relationship all began with a Christmas card. From there, this issue takes you to 96th Aviation Support Battalion, where Soldiers received Combat Action Badges and a Purple Heart for their heroism in engaging the enemy. And finally, a 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment Kiowa pilot and his average day flying in Iraq are highlighted.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Wings of Destiny* and we are pleased to do our best to keep family and friends informed while their loved ones are away. Air Assault!

SGT Ryan C. Matson, Editor

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NEWS

The 101st Combat Aviation Brigade in Operation Swarmer

Story and photos by SGT Ryan Matson
101st Combat Aviation Brigade



Swarming

The first group of American and Iraqi troops hit the ground to search the first objective during the initial Air Assault of Operation Swarmer March 16.

Operation Swarmer, the largest Air Assault since the initial invasion of Iraq, took place March 16 to 21, when the 3rd Combat Team, 187th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment and 101st Combat Aviation Brigade teamed up to “swarm” the Iraqi countryside near Samara, Iraq, looking for insurgent forces, weapons and explosives. The operation’s name was derived from the largest peacetime Airborne maneuvers ever conducted which were also called Swarmer, in North Carolina, 1950.

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The 101st Combat Aviation Brigade flew over 1,000 hours in support of the mission. 1st Battalion Apaches provided security through the air, 5th Battalion's Blackhawks served as the primary air movement battalion during the mission, and 6th Battalion also Air Assaulted troops and equipment as well as providing Command and Control aircraft.

The mission was a joint effort between U.S. and Iraqi Army forces. Over 2,500 troops, half of them Iraqi Army Soldiers, were inserted throughout the mission. The mission resulted in the capture of 96 suspected Anti-Iraqi forces and the questioning of hundreds more. Twenty four caches were also uncovered in the area during the operation. No United States Soldiers were killed in the operation.



They're not insecure

Two Soldiers from Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, relax as an Apache from 1st Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, provides aerial security shortly after the initial Air Assault March 16 outside Samara, Iraq.

Smiley faces

Two Iraqi girls greeted Soldiers with smiles as they searched the area for weapons and insurgent forces.





In the air...

A 5th Battalion, 101st Combat aviation Brigade UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, carrying Iraqi and American Army Soldiers, flies to the first objective of Operation Swarmer March 16.

... and on the ground

SPC Ben Gallegos, Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment (right), checks a pile of brush and dirt for hidden weapons or explosives while SSG Michael Ledbetter, Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, looks on. Company A uncovered four caches during Operation Swarmer.





Doing it their way

The Iraqi Army at work during Operation Swarmer (clockwise from top left): searching outside a home, detaining a suspect, giving children candy, riding in a truck at the Forward Arming and Refueling Point, and comforting a young child in one of the searched homes.





Air Assault!

U.S. and Iraqi Army Soldiers get on a 5th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade Blackhawk (above), and off a 6th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade Chinook (below.)





The green, green grass of Iraq

A UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter from 5th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, takes off after dropping off U.S. Army and Iraqi Soldiers near Samara, Iraq, March 17 as part of Operation Swarmer.



You do your job, I'll do mine

SPC Abel Sanchez, Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment (right), searches for weapons caches with a metal detector outside an Iraqi home while an Iraqi boy carries two lambs back to their pen.



Riding high

SGT Timothy McCaskill, Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, looks out the window of a 5th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, Blackhawk helicopter as it flies him to the next objective.



Meet the neighbors

(Above) SGT Ryan Armstrong, Company A, Third Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, shares some tunes with an Iraqi boy during Operation Swarmer March 17 near Samarra, Iraq. (Below left) SSG Jeremy Gibson, Company A, Third Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, says hello to a young Iraqi boy during Operation Swarmer March 16 in Iraq. (Below right) SFC Anthony Crisostomo, a platoon sergeant with Company A, Third Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, shakes hands with a little Iraqi girl during Operation Swarmer.





Dust bowl

SSG Michael Ledbetter, Company A, Third Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, gets sprayed with some Iraqi farm dirt as a 5th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter takes off after dropping him off during Operation Swarmer.



Cat nap

SPC Alex Sundberg, Company A, Third Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, finds a way to take a nap in the trunk of a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle during Operation Swarmer.

NEWS

Adopted

State of Illinois sponsors 542nd Medical Company for "Project Recreation"

Story and photos by SGT Ryan Matson
101st Combat Aviation Brigade



Shoe fly

SPC Joshua Kodya (left) and SPC Ryan Young (right) toss horseshoes at the pit they built on Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq, with other Soldiers from the 542nd Medical Company, 6th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade. The horseshoe sets were donated by people from Illinois as part of Project Recreation.

Though they are separated by thousands of miles and have never met, Erik Smith, a concerned citizen out of Rolling Meadows, Illinois, has changed the life of SFC Darryl Leonard and all the Soldiers in 542nd Medical Company deployed to Contingency Operating Base Speicher, near Tikrit, Iraq.

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Smith and his sister, Heidi Milner, have taken it upon themselves to “adopt” the 542nd Medical Company through a program they started with Leonard called “Project Recreation.”

The program has provided the Soldiers from the Company with recreation outlets during their long deployment to Iraq, where they work providing helicopter medical evacuations to injured and wounded Soldiers throughout Northern Iraq.



“When we arrived here, there was no Morale, Welfare and Recreation facility,” Leonard said in a building full of recreation and personal hygiene items. He was surrounded by a dart board, a handcrafted ping pong table, television, microwave, library, video collection, and shelves of board games and hygiene items. “This facility was a building that had nothing in it.”

“Because of these items the morale of the Soldiers has increased significantly. They are more enthused, and you can see the difference in how they perform everyday.”

All of the items around Leonard were donated by people in Illinois through Project Recreation.

Project Recreation was born Christmas Day through a simple Christmas card, and correspondence between Leonard and Smith. Smith had participated in something called Project Santa, a massive Christmas project in which Americans sent thousands of Christmas stockings to troops deployed to the Middle East. Leonard decided to pick up a stocking on Christmas morning, and in it found a Christmas card from Smith.

“I got his name and his e-mail address off his Christmas card,” Leonard said. “I took it upon myself to e-mail him back, thanking him for the

From Illinois with Love

SFC Darryl Leonard, a former drill sergeant and the Soldier in 542nd Medical Company who spearheaded Project Recreation, stands amidst boxes of donated games, books, sporting goods and other recreation supplies donated to the medical evacuation company deployed to Iraq from people in Illinois.

Christmas card.”

The two continued corresponding and Smith asked what more he could do. Together, they came up with the idea of Project Recreation, a project which would provide recreation opportunities to Soldiers from the company year-round. Since, aside from a weight set, there weren’t any recreation items in the company area, Leonard compiled a list of items the Soldiers could use.

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From Illinois with Love

SFC Darryl Leonard, a former drill sergeant and the Soldier in 542nd Medical Company who spearheaded Project Recreation, stands amidst boxes of donated games, books, sporting goods and other recreation supplies donated to the medical evacuation company deployed to Iraq.

Smith took the list to his local newspaper, the Peru News Tribune, and the project was underway. Soon Leonard started receiving box upon box of donated recreation items. Leonard, the company motor pool sergeant, said he started making use of the donations when he and his Soldiers weren't busy maintaining the company's vehicles.

One day he uncovered some concrete underneath an old building by the motorpool. Leonard and his Soldiers shoveled away all the sand on top of the pad and found the pad was big enough to become a basketball court. The only problem was they had no hoops. But when Smith's article reached the paper, soon the company had three sets of rims, nets and backboards. Leonard and his Soldiers – Sgt. Joshua Solem, Spc. Andrew Tiede, Spc. Ryan Young, Spc. Joshua Kodya, and Pvt. Omar Firpi - installed all three on the pad and a basketball court grew out of the desert sand. Beside it, they moved some gravel and set up a volleyball net. The Soldiers even found a chair in the dump and made a stand for it, creating an umpire's chair.

"Once the article hit the paper and it went to the town, it became very big," Leonard said of he and Smith's idea. In fact, he said it spread throughout the state of Illinois. Schools, churches and citizens sent both care packages and recreation items. Senator Gary Dahl and his wife Debbie even donated \$500 to the project.

Leonard and his Soldiers said they have made use of all donated items. He appointed Staff Sgt. James White to run the Morale Welfare and Recreation building, a small wooden building located just off the flight line, meaning flight medics and pilots waiting to go on an emergency flight can relax there in between calls. The Soldiers built shelves to hold all the donated books, making a small library in the center. They did the same for a VCR and donated VHS tapes, creating a video library. A microwave was donated and placed in the center for Soldiers to heat up meals and snacks between calls.

The donations didn't end there.

“Some of the items they have sent include numerous baseball gloves, balls and bats, a karaoke machine, karaoke CD’s, rackets, softballs, whiffle balls, and they’re even sending a foosball table,” Leonard said. “They’ve also sent food and many, many board games.”

Besides the basketball and volleyball courts, Leonard and his Soldiers also constructed a horseshoe pit and he said plans are in the works to build a softball field this spring to make use of the donated gloves bats and balls.



“I enjoy the baseball gloves and the baseballs, I use them all the time,” Young, one of the Soldiers who works as a mechanic in Leonard’s motorpool and helped him build the recreation areas, said. The other Soldiers all said that if they got the chance to be in a newspaper they wanted to thank the Illinois communities.

Currently, Leonard and his Soldiers are working on a small miniature golf course crafted on the bottom frame of the building that sat on the concrete pad which is now a basketball course. He is using spare gas mask filters as the holes and some green turf donated by people from Project Recreation.

All of the things Leonard and his Soldiers build are used by Soldiers in his company, but as Leonard pointed out, “MWR is open to everybody,” meaning anyone deployed to Contingency Operating Base Speicher, military or civilian, can make use of the facilities.

“It’s better to give than to receive, so our goal is to make it a better place for the next unit that comes along,” Leonard said. “When we built this stuff, we just went off of talent, the talent that these Soldiers were blessed to have growing up.”

Leonard has maintained a website tracking the progress of all the things that have developed as a result of Project Recreation, and said that he and the company Soldiers stay in constant communication with many of the people in Illinois who have supported them.

“I would like to say that we appreciate everything that the people of Illinois have done for us,” he said. “We appreciate the output and support that you have given us, and now this is here for the Soldiers”

Smith said he thinks finding Leonard and starting the project was no mistake.

“I am driven by the fact that I think everything in life happens for a reason,” Smith said in one of his e-mails to Leonard. “A great example of that is how one of the Christmas stockings that I sent found its way to you.”

NEWS

96th ASB Soldiers receive Combat Action Badge

Story and photos by 1LT Bridget Deuter
101st Combat Aviation Brigade



Purple Heart

SPC Tommy Aldridge, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 96th Aviation Support Battalion, was awarded a Purple Heart and a Combat Action Badge in Tikrit, Iraq on Feb. 6.

CONTINGENCY OPERATING BASE SPEICHER, IRAQ - Twenty-one Soldiers from 96th Aviation Support Battalion received Combat Action Badges on Feb. 6.

Last November Soldiers on a convoy near Ad Duluyia found themselves in a fire fight. The convoy was under fire and endured an Improvised Explosive Device explosion.

“The convoy was first hit by an IED,” said 1LT Sam Hartman, convoy commander, A Co, 96th Aviation Support Battalion. “Then we received small arms fire.”

During the IED explosion, SPC Tommy Aldridge, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 96th Aviation Support Battalion, was injured. He had a shrapnel wound on the side of his head.

“It was a 20-pound explosive that exploded near the truck,” commented Aldridge. “But I didn’t know what hit me until it was over.”

Aldridge received a Purple Heart for injuries inflicted during combat as well as the Combat Action Badge.



Combat vets
(Above) Soldiers from 96th Aviation Support Battalion were awarded the Combat Action Badge on Feb. 6 for enemy engagement on a convoy last November.
(left) COL Warren Phipps, 101st Aviation Brigade Commander, prepares to pin Spc Samantha Brooks, Company A, 96th Aviation Support Battalion, with a Combat Action Badge Feb. 6.

NEWS

One Day In Iraq...Kiowa Pilot

Finding caches and protecting infantry all in a days work for Kiowa pilots

Story and photos by SGT Ryan Matson
101st Combat Aviation Brigade



Eye in the sky

CW4 Brian Stoner, an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior armed reconnaissance helicopter pilot in 2nd, Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, does some post-flight checks following a flight Feb. 22 on Forward Operating Base Warrior by Kirkuk, Iraq. Stoner, who went from high school to flight school, has flown Army helicopters for 18 years.

KIRKUK, IRAQ -- They say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

In the case of CW4 Brian Stoner, a Kiowa pilot with 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, a weapons cache found can translate into countless lives of American Soldiers saved.

No one will ever know how many lives were saved as a result of a cache Stoner helped find on Dec. 15.

“Those things are hard to find for us, it’s kind of like a needle in a haystack,” Stoner said about the find. “When we’re able to stop it, and the ground guys are able to act on it, it’s just one less IED that can go off on our guys. That’s a big bonus.”

Stoner was flying lead (meaning he was flying first in a team of two Kiowa helicopters) with MAJ Thomas O’Connor, the squadron’s executive officer, as part of a Scout Weapons Team on a night mission in the Hawijah area. The elections had just ended and Stoner decided to check out an area to the North where previous known enemy activity had occurred. That’s when he spotted something suspicious through the aircraft’s Thermal Imaging System, which is able to detect a person’s body heat.

“As we came up on an open field, we identified six personnel in the field and as soon as we came upon them they dispersed,” Stoner said. “Within the course of the next few hours, we came across where they had been digging.”



Trouble below

Some of the materials used in the manufacturing of Improvised Explosive Devices uncovered after 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade Kiowa pilots Chief Warrant Officer Brian Stoner and Maj. Thomas O’Connor spotted suspicious people digging in a field near Hawijah, Iraq. The cache was the largest cache of IED-making materials in the area at the time.

The men in the field fled in separate ways, many hiding in irrigation ditches to avoid the helicopters. Stoner watched over the entire area and watched as two of the individuals fled to a small building, and in the meantime, contacted infantry forces on the ground and directed them to the area, where the two suspects were questioned and detained. Stoner also directed the ground troops to the area where he first spotted the six individuals, where they found what was at the time the largest cache of Improvised Explosive Device-making materials, consisting of more than 400 two-way radios, a significant amount of circuitry, detonating devices and other materials. Explosive Ordinance Detonation team members estimated the materials would have produced more than 80 IEDs. For these actions, Stoner was awarded the Air Medal.

“When you come up on something like that, you just look at it and there’s a feeling that this just isn’t right – whether it’s a discoloration in the ground, turned up soil that’s in the middle of an open field, a bag that’s just laying in the wrong spot – you sort of start getting this apprehension like, well, what is it?” Stoner said. “You get the ground guys in there to look at it, and usually when that sixth sense is kicking in it’s a pretty good chance you’ve found one. Then when the ground guys come up on it, they’re very cautious and they’ll confirm or deny it. When they confirm it and they tell us, ‘Yeah we got one!’ it’s a rush to find that stuff and shut it down.”

Since 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, moved to Forward Operating Base Warrior in November, Stoner said the Kiowa pilots have found numerous caches.

“That was the first big one we had and we’ve had numerous ones since then,” he said. “In fact in the last week we’ve had two really large finds and numerous other smaller ones.”

The OH-58D is an armed helicopter specially designed for reconnaissance missions. Because it is small and maneuverable, it can fly low to the ground, enabling pilots to use their bare eyes to pick up suspicious activity, or the thermal imaging sensor and other reconnaissance devices at night. Because it is armed, it can also fly just overhead of ground infantry troops, providing them close security and additional firepower.

Stoner said he loves the aircraft and its maneuverability.

“I love this thing,” Stoner said. “The mission’s great, the aircraft is great. It’s very nimble, especially in the altitudes and airspeeds we’re operating in. We’re down there with the infantry guys. It’s a great relationship with the infantry guys. The aircraft itself is very reactive. When we’re out there on a mission it can turn pretty quick. The Iraqis and the people we’re dealing with on the ground realize that we’re quick and that when we’re there, we’re pretty maneuverable and when the guys are trained like they are, it’s pretty lethal. The guys can put enough rounds on target to do what they have to do.”

The relationship with the infantry has become so strong that an infantry company from the 1st Brigade Combat Team has even been attached to the unit.

“They’re part of the squadron, we’re gonna do everything to support those guys when we’re out there, they’re one of our own,” Stoner said. “The area that they’re working is an important piece of ground, it’s pretty laden with IEDs.”

No matter how many caches Kiowas pilots spot, supporting infantry troops through providing aerial security to troops in convoys or other movements or responding to ground troops who have come into enemy contact will always be the prime mission, Stoner said.

“I love what we’re doing here, the infantry guys are great - we really enjoy supporting those guys,” he said.

When he's not saving lives by locating IEDs, Stoner works to keep pilots safe by serving as the squadron standardization pilot, meaning he ensures all pilots in the Cav are trained to task.

"I'm responsible for recording and setting up training plans to train all the aviators in the squadron to the standards that we have to train to," Stoner said.

"I make sure that everybody's on the same sheet of music as far as being able to execute the squadron's mission. I also do evaluations of the pilots as well as the training."

As a standardization pilot, Stoner, who went straight from high school to flight school 18 years ago, said he enjoys taking up some of the younger pilots. In a Kiowa, the pilot in the left seat runs the radio and other surveillance controls in the helicopter, while the pilot in the right seat flies the aircraft and shoots the weapons systems as necessary. The Kiowa can be armed with two rocket pods, or a rocket pod on one side of the aircraft and a .50 caliber machine gun on the other.

"Young guys like the right seat, we try to give them experience there," Stoner said.

Stoner, who hails from Norwalk, Ohio, had flown UH-1s for 10 years before he started flying Kiowas, and though he enjoys both helicopters, he said the Kiowa has become his favorite.

"I flew UH-1s up until 1997, and I've been flying Kiowas at Campbell since then," he said. "I like them both, but this one's a lot more fun – you get to shoot back."



Warrior

An OH-58D Kiowa Warrior armed reconnaissance helicopter from 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, lands on Forward Operating Base Warrior near Kirkuk, Iraq. Chief Warrant Officer Stoner has flown Kiowas for eight years.

PARTING SHOTS



Medicine men (and women)

Soldiers from 96th Aviation Support Battalion hone their combat lifesaving medical skills during an Eagle First Responder Class at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq March 9.