

Rescue Unit at Balad Serves as '911' for Iraq - DefendAmerica News Article



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Raymond Mathews (left) and Staff Sgt. Jason Parker, assigned to 66th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, cover the windshield to a HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter at Balad Air Base, Iraq, June 20, 2006. Elite, unique and one-of-a-kind in Iraq, the squadron is the only combat search and rescue unit in Iraq and is trained to save the people no one else can reach. U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Andrew Oquendo

Rescue Unit at Balad Serves as '911' for Iraq

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By U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Kerry Solan-Johnson

BALAD AIR FORCE BASE, Iraq, June 27, 2006 — Their motto is "That others may live" and if you're on the ground in combat and in trouble, those four words mean that help is on the way.

"We deployed a very-tailored package for this mission," McElhenney said. "We wanted to take everyone we could."

Three crews, consisting of aircrew, pararescue and combat rescue officers were dispatched on a dive operation to comb the murky waters of the Euphrates River. The soldiers were reported as "duty status and whereabouts unknown" after the

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Elite, unique and one-of-a-kind in Iraq, the U.S. Air Force airmen assigned to the 66th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron here are the only combat search and rescue unit in country. They are part of a highly-specialized field, made up of an extremely small community of highly-trained professionals who save the people no one else can reach.

"The airmen are totally committed to the mission. Each takes their responsibility seriously and wants to be on the crew that brings our guys back safely," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jim McElhenney, 66th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron commander. "These airmen are the reason why we're the first ones tasked. We have the capabilities to respond immediately and effectively."

Many of the saves the squadron has logged took place in Afghanistan, where coalition troops aren't as robust, McElhenney said. There, crews – consisting of aircrew, pararescue and combat rescue officers known as the "Guardian Angels" – respond to rescues that are outside their traditional "downed aviator" training. The 66th participated in recovery efforts during Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, for which rescue crews were awarded the Silver Star. More recently, the 66th was called on to extract troops from a Humvee in an active minefield. Crews were able to save two wounded people.

Crews are ecstatic when they were pivotal in a successful mission, McElhenney said.

Called in for only those facing extreme danger, the pararescuemen are the "911" unit for military troops in combat behind enemy lines. However, a rescue is not always possible. Even though 22 airmen from the squadron were among the first responders in the search for two U.S. soldiers abducted June 16, no signs of them were discovered until three days later.

checkpoint they were manning at a canal crossing near the Euphrates was attacked.

"We were looking on the eastern bank, looking for clues – just any sign of the soldiers," said U.S. Army Maj. Matt Wenthe, who served as the mission flight leader.

Two of the three crews, armed with hydrographic maps of the current, searched the river by air between a power plant near the attack site and a refinery. The third crew served as a liaison between ground forces and the dive team, feeding the dive team information as it became available.

The pararescue team was tasked in the search for the missing soldiers because of their capabilities: a short response time and the manning to support the search. The squadron is on high-alert status and operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Unfortunately, the aircrews and Guardian Angels had not turned up any clues when they were relieved by an Army dive team six hours later.

"It was frustrating," said U.S. Air Force Senior Airman John Hatzitakis, a personnel recovery specialist deployed from Moody Air Force Base, Ga. "We just wanted to find something – anything to give their families hope."

Crewmembers learned of the soldiers' deaths shortly before being interviewed for this story and expressed their regret at not being able to do more.

"Our prayers are with their families," said U.S. Air Force Capt. Jeff Marler, a pilot of one of the three HH-60s carrying the pararescue teams. "We did our best to bring their boys home."

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