U.S. Marine Corps photo by Master Sgt.Edward D. Kniery

CH-53 Super Stallions, Helo Support Team at LZ East, LSA VIPER Ammunition Supply Point conduct external lift operations April 1, 2003. Sgt. Donald Fields of LS Co. acts as the outside guideman. The force of the propellors create a sand storm that the HST team must work in. The HST provides loading and unloading of aircraft to include external lift operations. Transportation Support Group, Logistics Support Area Viper, 1st FSSG Forward Headquarters, IMEF, Iraq, supports all logistics for IMEF in theater during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Life in the Early Entry Command Post

Small team tactics mean large scale responsibility for Army Air Force weather team

By Capt. Bruce Stansbury
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For the past several months a small weather team has been thriving in a team environment within a self-sufficient command post. The command post is air delivered into a semi-permissive area, and provides information superiority to the Combined Forces Land Component Command.

The Combat Weather Team assigned to the Early Entry Command Post provides battlefield and situational awareness to the CFLCC Commanding General, Army Lt. Gen. David McKiernan. This is the environment that Master Sgt. Jim Vinson and I have worked in during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, but the real challenges started with our airlift into Baghdad.

Capt. Bruce Stansbury, EECP weather specialist, displays a load ramp designed by the CWT. The EECP generator trailers were too long for the angle of the C-17 tail ramp. Damage would occur during loading. The team conferred with air force loadmasters and engineers, they orchestrated the design, manufacture, and testing of specialized ramps critical to load the generators onto C-17, GlobeMaster III aircraft. The new ramps permitted rapid on-load and off-load of generators saving effort and precious time as landing zone is semi-permissive. The ability to fly vice road convoy saved precious time, countless dollars and, given the threat environment, lives.

Photo courtesy of CFLCC

The flight into Baghdad International Airport was to take one hour. Shortly after takeoff, our aircrew commander informed us that there was a firefight on BIAP and we might not land. However, at 1954Z, after being up since 0200Z, our team arrived at BIAP.

The six expanded cargo vans housing our command post are filled with state-of-the-art digital network and are housed within an abandoned aircraft maintenance hangar on BIAP.

"There was no electricity available outside of what our EECP generators provide. There was no running water on our portion of the airport. Water was in short supply so no hygiene was permitted with bottled water. A water buffalo was available for facial hygiene. Ditches were dug for latrines," Vinson recalls.

Since the EECP CWT was equipped with Night Vision Goggles, we were able to marshal vehicles from the aircraft to the staging area for assembly of the entire seven-pallet, 54-vehicle, 168-person package – while the entire airport was blacked out. With NVGs, an isolated area of low cumulus could be seen to the south, no impact to aviation – a great night to seize an airfield.

A layer of smoke was also visible. Several oil fires could be seen surrounding BIAP. Anti-Aircraft Artillery fire was witnessed to the west approximately 10 miles away. Soon after the AAA, there were explosions further north and then the AAA site erupted in smoke. More AAA was evident off and on throughout the night.

As aircraft arrived and launched, the dust on the runway and taxiways was kicked up and took visibility to zero for two minutes after each take-off. The dust is the same silty, flour type consistency as the dust of Afghanistan. Truck convoys on the other side of the runway also disturbed the dust. The rising dust reduced visibility to 20-30 feet in the night air.

The whine of turbine engines and the clatter/screeching of tank treads was heard as a column of a dozen or more Bradleys disappeared into their own dust and the night as they sped away from the airfield. Shortly after, in the direction of their departure, firefights erupted among a row of out buildings. The fights were mostly one sided, HUA! (HUA! means AIR POWER!) Other thunderous explosions were heard and felt, preceded by flashes of light to the east.

Once all chalks were downloaded, we convoyed to the setup site. A 2.5-hour combat nap was taken. We slept on the taxiway under an abandoned Iraqi commercial aircraft tow vehicle. This was to prevent or minimize personnel injury in the event of an accidental "hit and run" by moving vehicles. The sweat in our clothes under the body armor was cold in the night air.

The sound of rotor blades lapped the air throughout the following day. As evening approached, the comforting hum of the rotor blades was accompanied by the returning clatter of tank treads. During that evening's MREs, two loud explosions were heard and felt. The windows in our room flexed inward then rattled to rest with no damage.

Uniforms are worn until they are no longer clean, dry, and serviceable. Then a serviceable uniform is pulled from the b-bag – no laundry services are available. Chow is MREs – no chow schedule yet. We work, we eat, we rest as work allows. "This is the life," we send our thanks out to the CFLCC/SWO and the 18th Expeditionary Weather Squadron.

As for equipment, we have available to us the full gamut – STU-III, Tactical Telephone, SIPRNET, NIPRNET, IRIDIUM,

TMQ-53, MOS KIT, Kestrel 4000, E-Trex, FInWS, PVS-7B, JLISTS NBC Gear, M16s, and M9s.

Shortly after our arrival on BIAP, the EECP moved to a nearby presidential palace. The CWT participated in a 10-man advance scout party (1 five-ton, 2 HMMWVs) sent to seize and secure the new site. Vinson took charge the operations shelter 5-ton vehicle and its preparation for convoy movement the day of the EECP relocated to the Abu Guryhab Palace. Under constant threat of enemy fire, he completed the 54-vehicle convoy to the Abu Guryhab Palace without incident.

Our work within this command post is extremely rewarding. We provide staff weather functions to CFLCC/CG and the EECP leadership. As a small team in the much larger Air Force Weather community we managed the staff weather functions from the Operations and Intelligence shelter 24 hours per day and alert the leadership to micro-scale impacts to operations.

Our technology allows us to work with weather technicians around the AOR to expertly analyze and forecast blowing dust events, which empowered our leadership to facilitate a video tele-conference between COMUSCENTCOM and the President of the United States. Additionally, we have accurately forecasted another adverse weather event, which allowed for aggressive planning and resourcing for the arrival of the most senior enlisted member of the army, the Sergeant Major of the Army.

The extensive training and team building our weather team received greatly increased our multiple discipline proficiency and gained us much needed acceptance from our Army teammates and the trust of the leadership. This would not have happened without our weather training and the support of the entire Air Force Weather team.

Photo courtesy of CFLCC

Master Sgt. Jim Vinson, EECP weather technician, sets up a TMQ-53 on a roof top in Baghdad.