
The 551st Military Police Company, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, to support the 16th Military Police Brigade (Airborne) with detainee operations missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom 06-08. Over the course of the 15-month deployment, the 551st was responsible for the safe aerial transport of tens of thousands of detainees.

Operation Con Air

By Captain William A. Figueroa

The passengers in the dark aircraft were nervous as the airplane descended toward Baghdad. Many of the men were experiencing their first ride in an airplane, and the air sickness bags were getting plenty of use. To a number of passengers, the destination of the flight and the mission of the military unit accompanying them were unknown. As the aircraft touched down at the former Saddam International Airport, dozens of men—young and old—prepared for what would come next. Instantly, under the careful watch of Soldiers responsible for their safe transport across the country, the passengers rose from their seats and filed from the aircraft, their steps hindered by shackles rather than parachutes. No combat airborne jumps took place on this night—tonight belonged to Operation Con Air.

Operation Con Air, a recurring mission where detainees are transported throughout the Iraqi theater via aircraft, refers to a network of flights intended to facilitate the proper handling and due process procedures for detainees by expediting their travel for court appearances. The operation umbrella includes detainee transport from numerous division holding areas (DHAs) throughout the country to the larger, consolidated theater internment facilities (TIFs). The operation also supports return flights for detainees who are released from custody.

In the summer of 2006, the 551st Military Police Company deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, in support of coalition force, U.S.-led detainee operations missions. As the only Active Army military police company assigned to the 16th Military Police Brigade, the 551st was in direct support of the brigade headquarters. For 15 months, the “Hooligans” of the 551st were tasked with conducting a variety of missions for the 16th. The first five months of the tour placed the company’s 1st platoon in a mission support role for Operation Con Air, where the platoon was tasked with conducting detainee transfers between two coalition TIFs—Camp Cropper (in Baghdad) and Camp Bucca (in southern Iraq).

The mission of the 16th Military Police Brigade was to provide custody and care for thousands of

security detainees—civilians who were interned because they posed a threat to the security of coalition forces or the people of Iraq. After being captured, detainees were cared for by the capturing brigade until they were transferred to the nearest DHA (where they could be held for up to 14 days). The detainees were then transferred to Camp Cropper, where their cases were further reviewed. Detainees were released if their cases did not establish them as security threats to the Iraqi people or coalition forces. Some detainees, however, were transferred to Camp Bucca while their cases were forwarded to the Iraqi Judicial System. These detainees remained in the TIF as they awaited trial by the Central Criminal Court of Iraq (CCCI) or until a joint panel of U.S. and Iraqi personnel recommended release after determining that a detainee posed no security risk.

The current operational tempo calls for constant transfers of thousands of detainees across hundreds of miles of desert each month, including detainee transfers to and from multiple locations throughout the country for numerous reasons other than initial capture and final release. Since the CCCI is located in Baghdad, detainees at Camp Bucca are routinely shuttled to Camp Cropper to appear before the judge. For detainees who are not absolved of guilt by the CCCI, the flight becomes a round-trip back to Camp Bucca.



Soldiers inspect equipment in preparation for a Con Air mission.

Shortly before the deployment of the 551st Military Police Company, Colonel John Chambliss, commander of the 16th Military Police Brigade, visited the company at Fort Campbell and explained to its leadership that there was no room for error in the detainee operations arena. As the colonel explicitly stated, the company—and the brigade—would be “one mistake away from making the front page of the *New York Times*.” Upon their arrival in Baghdad, the sensitive nature of the mission clearly presented itself to the Soldiers of the 551st and gave legitimacy to the colonel’s concerns.

Despite personal feelings or suspicions toward detainees, it was important for the Soldiers of the 551st to remember that the civilians were detained because they were perceived by coalition forces as a threat to the security and stability of Iraq. While a number of personnel would be charged with serious crimes under felony law, an undetermined number of detainees were merely low-level associates of violent criminals or were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Soldiers realized that the detainees deserved fair, basic human rights treatment; but it

was also likely that most of the civilians would be released and allowed to return to their communities in the near future, where they would divulge the details of their treatment—good or bad—while under U.S. supervision. The actions of the Soldiers would either improve Iraqi perceptions of the United States or spread anticoalition dissent among the locals and create more enemies within the moderate Iraqi population. Since it was nearly impossible for Soldiers to distinguish between less threatening detainees and cold-blooded, anti-Iraqi forces captured while planting improvised explosive devices on the side of a road, all detainees were treated with respect at all times.

After the publicized events at Abu Ghraib, U.S. detainee operations became high-visibility missions with a zero-defect policy. The 551st Military Police Company needed to maintain a streak of unwavering professionalism to avoid bringing negative publicity to U.S. detainee operations. Since humane treatment goes beyond ensuring that detainees are not beaten or humiliated, Soldiers were expected to treat little issues with as much importance as big

issues. Mission briefs prior to all Con Air missions included a discussion on the basic rules to prevent breaches in professionalism that could contribute to larger problems in the future. Transported personnel were referred to by no name other than detainee. Soldiers were cautioned to refrain from using any language that would be deemed culturally insensitive. But most importantly, each mission brief included a review of the priorities of force—the escalation of force guidelines for handling detainees. All Soldiers departed the company area knowing that they were to shout verbal Arabic commands at a detainee prior to executing any physical force. Leaders also warned Soldiers of the difficulty in justifying the use of less-than-lethal weapons against detainees who, throughout most of the mission, had their hands and feet bound by shackles.

The preparation for a successful Con Air mission began well before mission briefs. Squad leaders ensured that all necessary equipment was mission-ready. For example, Soldiers inspected each set of shackles to verify that they were in proper working condition. This practice proved itself worthwhile on several occasions. Soldiers understood firsthand the necessity of taking extra time to check their equipment.

Not surprisingly, detainees often tested their limits in new surroundings. They talked to each other despite numerous commands from their escorts. Over time, military police Soldiers learned to expect and effectively respond to infractions. Leaders ensured that their Soldiers could tell the difference between detainees who were simply nervous and those who were openly rebellious. Regardless of the circumstances, however, Soldiers in the 551st Military Police Company, 1st Platoon, maintained a strict code of discipline.

The military police escorts were prepared for all emergency situations that could occur on the aircraft, and the support personnel were an integral piece of the Con Air mission. They traveled with—

- Use-of-force equipment to provide a full spectrum of response options to quell any disturbances during the flight.
- Medical personnel to deal with medical incidents.
- Onboard interpreters to ensure that all detainees understood the in-flight rules.

In addition to transporting detainees between Camp Cropper and Camp Bucca, Soldiers from the 551st Military Police Company were also responsible for transporting detainees released from internment.

The atmosphere surrounding these operations was notably different from that of a detainee transfer, beginning with the distinctive uniform change—from yellow jumpsuits to a more locally acceptable ensemble. The difference was further evidenced by the behavior of the detainees—they smiled more, walked faster, and complained less while sitting on the “happy bus.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Operation Con Air was the opportunity to observe human behavior during stressful situations. It was fascinating to witness the interaction among the groups of traveling detainees who, for the most part, did not know each other. Despite the population of suspected violent criminals, it was routine to see these Iraqi civilians carrying their elderly, wounded, and handicapped countrymen toward the staging area. As they sat on the floor of the aircraft, it was not uncommon to catch an ailing detainee spending the duration of the flight sleeping against the shoulder of another detainee who was randomly placed next to him. A detainee who asked for water usually offered the bottle to his left and right before returning it to the guard. Upon landing, detainees would habitually stand and extend a shackled hand to help another internee to his feet. Each Con Air mission made it more evident that even the most ruthless and coldhearted individuals can demonstrate compassion for others when the circumstances call for it. The hidden truth, however, was that these detainees—from many diverse religious and tribal sects throughout Iraq—found a common antagonism toward their American captors. Temporarily putting their differences aside, the worst among them was accepted as a brother and an ally against the guard force. This pact further showcased the importance of treating each detainee respectfully throughout the mission, as the military police Soldiers would never be granted the benefit of the doubt by this particular audience.

The subdued and compliant behavior of the detainees during transfer missions often made it difficult to believe that these were the same men who might later attack the TIF guards through various means, to include striking, spitting, and hurling feces. Though well behaved during Con Air missions, many of these detainees were violent criminals known for rioting and assaulting the compound guard force with improvised weapons. Therefore, it was imperative that Soldiers maintained vigilance throughout each Con Air operation. Whether the temperature at the airfield was 20°F or 120°F, the escorts thoroughly searched

detainees departing the aircraft before allowing them to take shelter on the buses that completed the journey to Camp Cropper. Rain or shine, regardless of how many months had passed without incident, the security element stood on the tarmac in the highest state of alert, keeping a watchful eye over the sea of yellow jumpsuits as other military police Soldiers thoroughly searched each detainee.

In its first five months in Baghdad, the 551st Military Police Company, 1st Platoon, transferred more than 14,000 detainees without incident. Although many of these men had a history of violence and would take any opportunity to do physical harm to a Soldier, the platoon was able to resolve all issues with interpersonal communication skills and minimal physical force, without having to employ a less-than-lethal weapon against

a detainee. Though no media or recording devices were authorized during Con Air missions, the platoon knew that, somehow, the world was watching. All Soldiers understood the important roles they played in rescuing the image of detainee operations in Iraq. They knew that leaders at all levels expected nothing less than absolute professionalism. Squad leaders ensured that their Soldiers knew how to defuse situations with the least amount of force while exercising authority over the detainees. Team leaders enforced standards during each mission and monitored Soldiers for the kind of complacency that could potentially give a detainee the advantage he needed to injure or kill. The willingness of leaders to maintain all aspects of military discipline among the ranks kept our military police Soldiers out of the hospital, out of jail, and out of the news.
