82nd CAB pilots hone skills in helicopter simulators

U.S. Army

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (Jan. 15, 2013) -- The weather outside the cockpit looked frightful for CH-47 Chinook pilots, Capt. Ron Braasch and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ryan Drouin as they approached Simmons Army Airfield, here, Jan 10.

Once they had safely landed and logged their flight hours, the two 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, or CAB, aviators stepped into the parking lot where the weather was bright and sunny -- a far cry from the fog, rain, snow and ice they encountered during their flight.

Pilots throughout the Pegasus brigade use the Southeast Regional Flight Simulation Training Center at Simmons Army Airfield to help maintain and enhance their aviation skills.

"Our facility has CH-47 Chinook, AH-64 Apache Longbow and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter simulators for pilots stationed at Fort Bragg and throughout the southeast. We also have an Aviation Combined Arms Tactical Trainer, or AVCATT, which can be reconfigured to represent different aircraft and help train a unit for tactical operations," said retired Chief Warrant Officer 5 Jack Dalton, the senior simulator instructor operator for the center.

With their recent redeployment from Afghanistan, the 82nd CAB faces some limitations on operational aircraft as they go through maintenance phases and reset their equipment for their upcoming mission to support the global response force.

"These simulators allow four additional pilots to hone their skills every day. The training is really good to practice using the aircraft instruments, which are the same as they are in the actual aircraft," said Braasch, a Jacksonville, Fla., native, who serves with Company B, 3rd General Support Aviation Battalion.

Based on the input scenario, these instruments adjust to reflect the weather, altitude and other conditions these military aircraft might encounter.

"They can pick up things they would in the real world, like Humvees, Howitzers and other military equipment they may be expected to carry via sling load," said retired Chief Warrant Officer 4 Pat Trotter, retired, a simulator instructor operator for the Chinook simulator.

As the Chinook pilots challenged their ability to lift heavy loads and support ground troops, there was a gunfight going on in the simulator down the hall as the 82nd CAB Apache pilots conduct their crew qualification training for next month's aerial gunnery range.

"We're simulating the engagement we will see at actual ranges and preparing our tactics, techniques and procedures for the ranges without actually using live ammunition," said Capt. Jeremy Irvine, an Apache pilot and commander of Company B, 1st Attack and Reconnaissance Battalion, 82nd CAB.

While Irvine, of Leavenworth, Kan., and his copilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Matthew Baden, were preparing for events they will see through their actual cockpit, the center also offers training that is unrealistic in the actual aircraft.

"Flying here allows us to simulate emergency scenarios that we cannot practice during a flight in the actual aircraft," said Baden, of Littleton, Colo.

In addition to preparing the pilots to deal with emergencies, supplementing actual flight hours with time in the simulator offers other advantages to Army aviators.

"For an actual flight, we show up three hours before take off, to make sure everything is good to go with the aircraft. Here, we can be training in 45 minutes," said Drouin, of Gorham, N.H.

A significant cost savings compliments this time efficiency offered by the training center.

"An hour in the simulators costs at least $1,500 less than an hour flying the actual aircraft," Dalton said. "In addition, the Army saves millions of dollars on ammunition when the time comes for the aerial gunnery ranges."

Come rain or shine at Simmons Army Airfield, 82nd CAB pilots can almost always be found honing their skills in these virtual helicopters.

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