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Army 12th: Flying the Brass

By Douglas Nelms | April 1, 2012
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f t e in d r



U.S. Army Air Operations Group's 12th Aviation Battalion flies a fleet including "gold top" VH-60, UH-60 and UH-72A helicopters. File photo

Like most major U.S. corporations, the U.S. Army maintains a fleet of VIP aircraft for its top executives. And for the same reasons—to get its top people where they need to go as quickly and efficiently as possible.

However, while this fleet of rotary and fixed-wing aircraft serves the same purpose as its civilian counterparts, it has one caveat that civilian corporations don't have—it's also available "to support our nation's leadership in all contingencies, which could include natural or man-made disasters," according to the unit's commander, Col. Scott Sanborn, a dual-rated aviator who most recently served as the chief of operational integration for the Secretary of Defense's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Task Force. This VIP flight detachment is officially known as the U.S. Army Air Operations Group (AAOG), headquartered at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., and tasked to provide aviation support to the Military District of Washington (MDW) and Joint Forces Headquarters-National Capital Region (JFHQ-NCR).

This support is provided by three "pillars" made up of separate fixed and rotary wing operations, plus command of Davison Army Airfield at Fort Belvoir, Va. and the Pentagon helipad.

The fixed-wing element, the U.S. Army Priority Air Transport (USAPAT) command, operates corporate jets consisting of three UC35 Cessna Citations, two Gulfstream GVs and a G550 based at Andrews AFB, Md., a GIII at Ramstein AFB, Germany and a GIV at Hickam AFB in Hawaii. USAPAT has the primary mission to provide long-haul support for the top tiered offices of the Department of the Army, such as the Secretary of the Army and Chief of Staff of the Army, and the commanders of U.S. Army forces in the Pacific and Europe. It also includes commanders of organizations such as U.S. Army Training & Doctrine Command, Army Forces Command and Army Material Command, as well as Congressional delegations traveling in support of Army operations.

The largest segment of the AAOG is the 12th Aviation Battalion, based 16 miles south of the Pentagon at Davison AAF to provide rotary-wing support for the Pentagon and MDW.

However, "it's much more than MDW. If there is an Army rotary-wing requirement [within the National Capital Region, or NCR], we support it," Sanborn said. "The primary customers would be the senior leadership based out of the Pentagon (such as senior staff officers, directors, Chiefs of Service, Secretaries of the Services, etc.), or government agencies based throughout the NCR, such as the National Geospatial Intelligence

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Agency, the U.S. Cyber Command at Fort Meade, or any of the senior leaders that have aviation requirements."

The AAOG was officially activated on Oct. 4, 2005, as a result of lessons learned from the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Gen. Richard A. Cody, then Vice Chief of Staff and an Army Aviator, recognized the need to have a consolidated, colonel-level headquarters "to orchestrate all the aviation aspects supporting the NCR," Sanborn said.

However, origins of the rotary-wing VIP operations date back to 1955, when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles decided to find out if it would be faster to drive to the President's retreat at Shangri-La, now Camp David, or be picked up at the Pentagon by helicopters from Davison AAF and flown out. It was 45 minutes faster by helicopter.

Almost immediately the 3rd and 509th Transportation Companies, based at Davison and flying Piasecki CH-21s and CH-25s, had their mission changed from supporting the Army's Engineer School at Fort Belvoir to supporting the Pentagon and MDW.

MDW's fixed-wing assets were also based at Davison AAF until 1994, when it was reorganized and those aircraft were assigned to the National Guard as the Operational Support Airlift Command.

In 2004 they were again reassigned, going to the U.S. Army Services and Operations Agency, Office of the Administrative Assistant, HQDA and physically located at Andrews AFB.

The



This UH-1D is one of the original Hueys to fly for the VIP flight detachment and marks the entrance to Davison Army Airfield. File photo

reorganization of 1994 also assigned the 12th Aviation Battalion to take over MDW VIP flight duties, operating a mixed fleet of Bell Hueys and Sikorsky Black Hawks. The Hueys were retired in 2002. The Army subsequently ordered eight Eurocopter UH-72A Lakotas for the unit, with the first aircraft arriving in July 2010.

Following the tragedy of 9/11, the MDW Engineer Co. was re-organized as the 911th Technical Rescue Engineer Company (TREC) and incorporated into the 12th Aviation Battalion to provide specialized emergency response capabilities in the event of natural disasters or terrorist attacks.

The 12th is led by 1993 West Point graduate, LTC Reed Erickson, who took command on June 9, 2011. The unit consists of six companies, with three rotary-wing companies comprising 26 total aircraft—Companies A and C, equipped with nine UH/VH-60 Black Hawks each, and Company B operating the eight UH-72A Lakotas. The remaining three companies include a Headquarters Company, Company D for maintenance, and the 911th TREC.

The 18 Black Hawks of the battalion are A, L and M models, with eight of the A and M models in VIP



The first of eight UH-72As delivered to the 12th Aviation Battalion at Davison Army Airfield. The Lewis L. Stone Hangar is for the UH-60s. The UH-72As are kept in a hangar on the opposite side of the runway.

configurations as VH-60s. Each company has four VH-60s and five UH-60s.

Bravo Company, which had been deactivated with the retirement of the VH-1s, was reactivated in 2009 in preparation for introduction of the UH-72As.

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Until 2003, all of the unit's VIP helicopters had white tops, in keeping with all other military VIP units. However, the unit went from "White Tops" to "Gold Tops" following departure of the VH-1s.

This was to differentiate the 12th Aviation Battalion from the U.S. Marine Corps' HMX VIP squadron, Erickson said.

The selection of aircraft type is determined by the mission, normally dependent on the VIP status and number of personnel needing to be transported, according to CW3 Blake Towler, a pilot with C Company.

The Lakotas are configured for eight passengers with VIP seating, plus VIP headsets, so that two UH-72As could be used if the number of passengers exceed the capacity of a single Black Hawk but not enough for two. Although configured for VIP flights, the Lakotas do not have the shiny gold tops.

A major operation for the unit is a 24-hour standby mission to carry members of the 3rd Infantry Regiment's "Old Guard" and a general officer to Dover AFB to meet the arrival of service members who have died while in the service of their country. Although officially known as the "Dignified Transfer of Remains," it is called "Fallen Heroes" by the members of the 12th Aviation Battalion. Once the transfer of the remains is completed, the 12th returns the Honor Guard to Washington. They do not transport the fallen hero.

Who Gets to Fly

Prior to 1970, requirements for helicopter missions were rather loose, with few restrictions as to authorization for flights. However, in 1969, the media started reporting the flight operations out of Davison as an expensive taxi service for the Pentagon, wasting the taxpayers' money.

As a result, who gets to fly on a 12th Aviation Battalion helicopter is determined based on a very rigid set of rules and regulations, plus a tier level schedule, with the highest tier level being the President. The tier levels then work their way downward, based on job title rather than rank. So while Gen. Raymond Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army, and Gen. Lloyd Austin, Vice Chief of Staff, are both four-star generals, Gen. Odierno has greater responsibility, and thus higher priority, and tier level, than Gen. Austin, his number two man.

Other restrictions also apply. The 12th is not allowed to transport anyone within the NCR, such as from the Pentagon to Andrews AFB, and being picked up at the Pentagon is restricted to upper level military officers or DoD/DoA civilians on critical missions. Otherwise, individuals must either drive out to Davison AAF or be picked up at Fort McNair.

"Several checks and balances have been put in place over the past couple of years to ensure that the assets are being used wisely and efficiently," Sanborn said. "We need to do the right thing to protect the taxpayers' dollars."

For standard day-to-day missions, requests from within MDW go through the G-3 Air Staff while external mission requests come down through the Army's Executive Travel Office.

When the pilots are flying within the NCR, such as to pick up personnel at the Pentagon or Fort McNair, they are under the control of the Reagan National Airport (DCA) tower. The NCR has specific routes for helicopter flights, designed to ensure the safety of the large number of law enforcement and military helicopters operating throughout the Washington area—not to mention commercial airliners arriving and departing National Airport.

When a pilot enters the NCR, he contacts DCA tower and provides the routes, by route number, he will be flying. The tower then approves that flight and advises of any traffic in the area. National tower also has direct communication with the Pentagon helipad, so if the pilot will be landing at the Pentagon, the tower hands him off to the Pentagon helipad controller. On departure, the pilot is again turned back over to the National tower controller. For an IFR flight out of the Pentagon, the pilot files a flight plan on the ground prior to leaving Davison AAF. When departing the Pentagon helipad, the pilot contacts National tower, which turns him over to departure control for his IFR clearance. In general, flights out of Davison AAF are restricted to a 100-mile radius.

Pilots for the VIP detachment are all highly experienced combat veterans. "We do not have any pilots in the 12th who have not been on at least one tour in Iraq or Afghanistan," Sanborn said. "In some cases, some have had two or more tours. So we have an incredible amount of experience."

All of the pilots in Companies A and C are rated in both the UH-60A and L models, Erickson said. "A Company has the only UH-60M qualified pilots, but not all (A Company pilots) are qualified." He also noted that the Army's Office of Personnel keeps an eye out for UH-60M rated pilots

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who could be assigned to the 12th, or who could be sent through the transition course prior to being assigned to the 12th. Erickson himself is qualified in the A and L models as well as the UH-1, but has not yet been checked out in the UH-60M or the UH-72A.

Pilots who were qualified in aircraft other than the UH-60 or UH-72A, such as Apache, Chinook or Kiowa Warrior, go through a transition course prior to arriving at Davison, he said.

Duty with the 12th is considered a highly sought after assignment, Towler said. "The duty tour is normally two years, with pilots and crew chiefs normally getting assigned to Davison by asking for it... although it is not generally known about."

The pilots are required to stay current in night vision goggles and instrument flying, with most pilots required to fly a minimum of 48 hours semi-annually. Flight hour requirements are based on the pilot's Flight Activity Category. Those whose primary job is to fly are listed as FAC-1 and must meet the 48-hour semi-annual minimum. Those with significant additional duties, such as staff duties, are FAC-2 required to log a minimum of 30 hours semi-annually, and the "desk jockeys" with no flight duties are FAC-3 with no minimum requirements.

There are no mandatory simulator training requirements. However, IFR currency is required and simulator training is available as desired. At one time, Davison had an extensive simulator facility for the UH-1s. That is now gone, so the pilots have to go down to Fort Bragg, N.C., or Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. for simulator training.

Maintenance for the helicopters is provided under contracts to civilian components, although they fall under command of D Company, commanded by CW4 Marc Anderson, a maintenance test pilot. Government employee civilian maintenance personnel maintain the UH/VH-60s.

Maintenance on the UH-72As is provided under a 10-year contract with Sikorsky Aerospace Services. That contract is now at the halfway point, SAS said. Sikorsky also noted that as the principal logistics support contractor for the Lakota program, it is maintaining an average 90 percent operational availability for the fleet with a material fill rate of 95 percent.

The unit can provide the first two echelons of maintenance in-house, to include AVUM (unit maintenance) and AVIM (intermediate maintenance). For depot level maintenance the aircraft are normally sent to the Corpus Christi Army Depot (CCAD). However, special permission can be obtained to do depot level within the unit.

VIP Equipment

While the UH/VH-60As and Ls have analogue "steam gauge" cockpits, the UH/VH-60Ms and the UH-72As have digital multifunction displays (MFDs). The aircraft are equipped with special avionics allowing them to communicate with law enforcement and other civilian organizations in the event of emergency operations.

The UH-72As are equipped with Raytheon ARC-231 tactical radios with FM/VHF/UHF bands as well as Wulfsberg 5000 and 2000 radios, with the 2000 used to communicate with civilian law enforcement agencies. The aircraft are also equipped with Blue Force Trackers, a GPS-enabled system providing the location of other aircraft.

The Black Hawks have a combination of Honeywell, Raytheon and Rockwell Collins avionics as well as a BAE AN/ASN 128 GPS system. The VH-60s also have a Bendix Stormscope and Rockwell Collins UNS Nav System.

Unlike the UH-60s, the UH-72A is an off-the-shelf helicopter, a militarized EC145 purchased directly from EADS North America, parent company to American Eurocopter, which produces the aircraft in Columbus, Miss. The first 20 pilots from Bravo Company received training directly from Eurocopter, according to CW-3 James Lamb, a B Company instructor pilot. Pilots designated as UH-72A instructors back in the 12th were required to have already been instructor qualified.

One critical area of training is to strengthen and maintain the synergistic relationship between the helicopter pilots and the 911th TREC. The 911th is the only unit of its kind in the Army, specializing in rescue techniques for victims trapped in structurally damaged buildings. Its members are all combat engineers trained in rescue operations.

"C Company has the specific mission to transport the 911th TREC's Initial Response Team (IRT) in the event of activation," Erickson said. "To prepare for this, the two units train on sling load operations monthly in day and night conditions to practice the loading and rigging of vehicles, hand and arm signals, and proper sling operations. This mission is executed periodically throughout the year in support of external training

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missions with other DoD and civilian emergency response agencies."

Erickson noted that the 12th Aviation Battalion staff interacts with other agencies "to identify requirements and refine our plans when needed. Pilots receive most of their training internally through a thorough local area flight orientation of key locations and flight routes supporting our missions."

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