

Attack from Above

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Photo by Joe Barrentine/The News Tribune

SHAIBA, Iraq – The Black Hawks landed amid swirling dust and gravel. Ten Iraqis, seven American soldiers and an interpreter hurried off the helicopter and instantly fell into the prone position.

The helicopters took off. The soldiers scanned for enemies throughout the dusty emptiness of the Shaiba Training Center. They soon set up their initial position: Fort Lewis soldiers and Iraqi commandos flanking to both sides, the radio-telephone operator calling in positions and an American platoon sergeant and Iraqi lieutenant barking orders.

The objective of Sunday's training mission in Basra province was a bunker several hundred yards away. The troops advanced and swarmed the concrete structure rising from the scrubland. An Iraqi soldier tossed a smoke grenade, a message for the helicopters swirling overhead.

The Black Hawks landed. The troops sprinted to the helicopters. They were airborne less than a minute later. And the latest training mission for the combined aerial reaction force came to an end.

The 17th Fires Brigade's 1st Battalion, 377th Field Artillery Regiment has operated an aerial reaction force to respond to indirect fire attacks since the Fort Lewis unit arrived in Basra in August.

But in November, the battalion began training alongside commandos from the 14th Iraqi Army Division. The idea is to put together a team of Iraqis and Americans who can be called upon within minutes to secure and investigate attacks.

"When I first got here, someone told me (the Iraqis) didn't really know anything," Sgt. 1st Class Jeff Keesee said. "But that first time we landed, man, they almost knew more than we did."

Basra has been largely quiet for the past 18 months, since the Iraqi army forced the Mahdi Army and other insurgent groups from the city during an operation dubbed Charge of the Knights. The aerial reaction force has been put into service five times since the unit arrived in Basra in August. They once took small-arms fire shortly after landing; during another incident, an insurgent fired a rocket-propelled grenade as the Black Hawks took off.

The combined force, though, is still in the training phase: On Sunday's mission, the Iraqi commandos didn't carry ammunition in their rifles. And the troops had some hitches, like when an Iraqi commando threw a smoke grenade but didn't pull the pin.

Red smoke – the symbol for trouble – began spewing from the canister after Keesee pulled the pin. The RTO had to call to the helicopters overhead and tell them not to worry.

But Keesee, a 37-year-old Oklahoma native running the operations for the force, said the Iraqis are at the point where the Iraqis can put the training to use.

"They're sick of training," the 37-year-old platoon leader said. "They're soldiers, and they're good soldiers. They want to get out there and put all of this into use."