

Command CWOs

Experience, luck give aviators perfect deployment to Iraq

By [Gina Cavallaro](#) - Army Times Staff writer
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The 4th Combat Aviation Brigade came home in June from a year in Iraq with every one of its 113 helicopters and 2,800 soldiers.

The brigade logged 92,000 flight hours, transported 3,500 patients, did 22,000 troop movements and ferried countless numbers of people to locations in and around Baghdad with no accidents, no injuries and no fatalities, the commander said.

Brigade commander Col. Pat Tierney called it the first time an aviation brigade has been able to make that claim in Iraq or Afghanistan. He credited the safety record not only to luck and hard work, but also to giving the chief warrant officers an elevated status on par with battalion and brigade commanders and command sergeants major, and giving them a "somewhat unorthodox" title.

"We called them 'command chief warrant officers,'" Tierney said.

The brigade was "really fortunate" to deploy with several senior warrant officers, he said. Their expertise, and their command status, may have helped save lives, he said.

Even with 180 aviation chief warrant officers 5 in the conventional Army and 88 slots for them in the 11 aviation brigades, it's fortunate to deploy with those slots filled, said Chief Warrant Officer 5 Pete Keafer, chief of aviation warrant officer assignments at Human Resources Command. Their availability varies per deployment because there are so few of them.

In a combat arms unit, Tierney said, the command sergeant major is "the man," and his knowledge and experience help guide plans and tactics. But in the aviation community, it's the senior warrants who have been around the longest and have done the most when it comes to flying.

"So we gave them this title and in every way a command sergeant major would work with his noncommissioned officers, our chief warrant officers were empowered to be that guy with the junior pilots," Tierney said.

He made the unusual move of placing chief warrant officers 5 in each of his five battalions and kept one in particular at the top of the brigade with him and his command sergeant major. That one is Chief Warrant Officer 5 Lance McElhiney, a 62-year-old with 41 years flying Army helicopters.

"We're the ones who stay. We're the technicians. We're the keeper of the keys," said McElhiney, whose first combat missions as a young Cobra pilot were in Vietnam. "If you want to open up that knowledge, you come to a warrant officer."

For soldiers, his role took some getting used to.

"Tierney ... gave me more than a voice. When I walked around and said something, it stuck. He gave me the power to do what I needed to do," McElhiney said. "At the beginning, a lot of people didn't like it. I was new on the block. But then after it started going, everyone enjoyed it and thought it was a good idea."

Tierney said having his command chief warrant officers in the cockpit with his aviators saved lives.

"You could hear the guy say, 'Hey, sir, this is dangerous,' but by seeing it firsthand and then having these command chief warrant officers, we could put our heads together and say, 'Look, this is the thing that's going to kill us, what can we do?'" Tierney said, adding, "So it's kind of a combination of leadership that actual card-carrying commanders had."

With his senior warrant officers distributed through the brigade, Tierney created a climate of leading by example. Safety came before anything else, and members of the brigade were mindful that the Combat Readiness Center says most accidents and fatalities occur in the war zone in the first and last 90 days of a deployment, Tierney said.

Experience in the cockpit was another key factor in the brigade's safety record. For example, Tierney is rated on all the Army's helicopters, and he flew Chinooks, Black Hawks and Longbows in Iraq.

The brigade's commanders flew more than senior officers normally do, and they were able to learn firsthand what the threats were. Then they could figure out how to avoid them.

The brigade's train-up before deployment, Tierney said, also contributed to the error-free year. He stationed his battalions in El Paso, Texas; Colorado Springs, Colo.; and on the U.S.-Mexico border with the Border Patrol across an area larger than Iraq, so that by the time they got downrange, the distances seemed easier because the area was smaller.

Tierney, who flew in the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment under then-Col. Dick Cody, recalled Cody telling him that "the absence of an accident doesn't mean the presence of safety."

"It's real sexy to say this is how many rockets we fired, here's who we killed, here's who we moved for assaults, but it seemed to us that our charter was the safe delivery of the guys that we had," Tierney said.