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## *A day with the cavalry in Afghanistan*

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*This is an edited version of a paper first published in the Spring 2008 edition of Fourays, the Journal of the Australian Army Aviation Association. In it, Hayden Archibald, then a captain on exchange with the United States 101<sup>st</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade, describes a day in the life of a helicopter pilot in Afghanistan in 2008.*

It is 0230h when I am awoken, dreary-eyed. I'm on the early team today and will brief for the mission at 0330h. Following a quick shower and shave, I dress in my Australian Disruptively Patterned Combat Uniform flying suit – the green one as I believe it blends in better up north in the mountains. When I fly down south where the terrain is open and desert-like, I'll wear my tan suit. As I walk to work, I pass the squadron's line of Kiowas, Blackhawks and Apaches and the Chinooks further down the field. It's quite a task force I belong to here in Jalalabad. I'm on the headquarters of the aviation unit that owns the north-east corner of Afghanistan known as N2KL – an acronym for the Nangahar, Nuristan, Konar and Laghman provinces. On my way to the briefing centre, I reflect on my journey so far with the United States Army .....

I was posted to the United States as an exchange officer in December 2006 and moved my family across the Pacific to Clarksville, a small town in Tennessee near Fort Campbell, Kentucky – home of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. I commenced my training on the OH58D Kiowa Warrior and fell in love with the aircraft. It's a Bell 406 airframe with a mast-mounted sight, thermal and day television and weapons pylons capable of fitting hellfire missiles, seven shot rocket pods and a 0.50 calibre machine gun. The aircraft is equipped with multi-function displays, including a moving map display and a blue-force tracker which provides real-time updates in the cockpit. Flying this aircraft highlighted to me the importance of continuous modifications to allow our combat aircraft to remain effective on today's battlefield.

I was assigned to Charlie Troop, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 101<sup>st</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade (2-17 Cavalry Squadron). The squadron has a headquarters troop – the squadron commander and his staff; three troops (Alpha, Bravo and Charlie) of Kiowa Warriors with 10 aircraft per troop; a maintenance troop (Delta); and Echo Troop – the motor pool, cooks, armourers and all the lads and lasses who keep the squadron running. We had orders to deploy at the end of the year and the squadron, which had just returned from Iraq, was already training for war. There was a tremendous amount of experience through the ranks. I completed my training in the Kiowa Warrior and flew training missions in and around Kentucky and

Tennessee focused on reconnaissance and security with the ability for close-combat attack. In September, I qualified as a pilot-in-command and an air mission commander and in gunnery – 0.50 calibre and rocket live-fire and training hellfire missiles.

By August, the packing lists were out and the headquarters devised the deployment order to organise the units into multi-functional aviation units with each airframe represented. Drawing from an OH58D cavalry squadron, an AH64 Apache battalion, a UH60 Blackhawk battalion, a CH47 Chinook battalion and a medical evacuation (medevac) company, we in 2-17 Cavalry Squadron came to look like this:

- 14 x OH58D Kiowa Warriors (troop plus)
- 6 x AH64D Apaches (company minus)
- 6 x UH60L Blackhawks (company minus)
- 4 x CH47D Chinooks (platoon)
- 3 x UH60A MEDEVAC Blackhawks (platoon)
- 4 x unmanned aerial vehicle systems
- 18 x Pathfinders (platoon minus)

I deployed to Afghanistan in January 2008 as the executive officer of Charlie Troop and began flying every day, learning the battlespace and challenging terrain here in the N2KL provinces. Our area of operations (AO) runs north of the Tora Bora Mountains and skirts the Afghan-Pakistan border into Nuristan province and the Kamdesh Valley. Our mission is to execute aviation operations in support of the ground force. The Kiowas had only been deployed to Afghanistan once before, but never in this AO. We quickly built a reputation for finding the most obscure things and provided close-combat attack for forward operating bases and convoys within the AO. We took pride in knowing that a convoy would not be attacked if a scout weapons team were in support.

I flew close to 250 hours during the first three months in the troop and then moved to squadron headquarters as the assistant operations officer (AS3), where I still fly about twice a week to maintain understanding of the battlespace. Lieutenant Colonel John Lynch, the squadron commander and senior aviator, believes leaders should fight from the front. He insists that his knowledge of the brigade battlespace is enhanced exponentially with his time in the cockpit and he requires all aviation staff officers maintain this level of exposure.

The squadron is in direct support to the infantry brigade here in N2KL, but also supports special operation forces and other coalition forces. My primary role as the AS3 is to plan and synchronise aviation support for combat operations. I coordinate task force assets and infantry brigade units in the planning and execution of air-assault operations throughout the AO; and I manage the targeting process for the scout and attack weapon teams.

My day continues..... Arriving at the briefing centre, we ensure the paperwork is 'squared away' and bring ourselves up-to-date on the friendly and enemy situations in the battlespace over the past 24 hours. It's always kinetic in one particular valley and today is no change. We are given our mission and the weather forecast and are updated on fires and close air support during our time block. It's always good to know the A10s are in a 'killbox' near our intended destination. There also are 155mm guns and 120mm mortars at forward operating bases around the AO to call on if required.

After conducting the team brief, we crank-up, top off with fuel and load ammunition. I'm flying a rocket/rocket aircraft and trail has a rocket/0.50 calibre one. We mix the rockets with high explosive, Flechettes and white phosphorus, and then depart.

Upon entering the valley, we are tasked to undertake a reconnaissance and we are updated on a 'troops-in-contact' that just occurred on a convoy moving through the area. Smoke still rises from the engagement area after the 155s are 'rounds complete' and we begin our reconnaissance of the ridgelines and trail networks moving away from the area. Some suspicious personnel are moving in the vicinity and we photograph them and pass a spot report to the forward operating base that owns the valley in which we are operating. We move on and continue searching the towns, roads and trails and report on several areas of interest.

On departure from the valley, we check off from the infantry unit and are immediately informed of another forward operating base that is taking fire during a resupply. En route, we contact the AH64D escort and conduct a battle handover, as the 64s have to continue their escort of the resupply aircraft. We move into the engagement area and are talked onto the origin of the enemy fire. Having ensured that all friendly forces are inside the wire, we engage the area with rockets and 0.50 calibre machine guns – the enemy stops firing onto the base. We continue to search the area until fuel requires us to depart for the day. That's the end of our mission; and as we pass the next scout weapons team transiting into the area, we give them a situation report. They are supporting another convoy, but will swing into the valley to ensure there is no further activity in the area.

It's not all calm waters and missions do not always go to plan. On one particular flight recently, my lead



Captain Hayden Archibald and Major Jeff Bouma,  
executive officer 2-17 Cavalry Squadron  
[Photo: Major Archibald]

took fire and unfortunately the pilot, a good friend of mine, received a gunshot wound and didn't make it. It is dangerous work maintaining stability in a fractured society.

I'm currently into the tenth month of the tour and will shortly redeploy back to the United States, then move back to Australia with my wife and daughter. This posting has been the most professionally rewarding experience in my career to date. It has reinforced the importance of aviation as an adaptable fully-integrated combat multiplier. The ability to task organise all airframes under one command has brought dynamic results to the battlefields of northern Afghanistan. In addition, the opportunity to fly combat missions in an armed reconnaissance helicopter directly supporting the infantry and knowing that our presence saves lives every day has allowed me to develop aviation tactics, techniques and procedures suited to the current fight in Afghanistan.

**The Author:** Major Hayden Archibald enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in 1992 as an airfield defence guard and served in No. 1 and No. 2 Airfield Defence Squadrons, before entering the Royal Military College, Duntroon. He was commissioned into the Army Aviation Corps in 2000 and subsequently qualified as a pilot on the OH58 Kiowa. Posted to 162 Reconnaissance Squadron in Townsville, he saw operational service as a pilot in East Timor in 2001 and 2003; and as a staff officer in Baghdad in 2005. During an overseas exchange with the United States 101<sup>st</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade flying the OH58D Kiowa Warrior armed reconnaissance helicopter, he deployed to Afghanistan in January 2008 for 12 months, where he flew combat missions and acted as squadron assistant operations officer. He is currently an instructor at the School of Armour, Puckapunyal.