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NCOs stay focused on job as they say goodbye to Kiowa helicopters

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Members of the Kiowa maintenance crew of 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, lock down and cover a Kiowa Warrior helicopter in December at the Rodriguez Live Fire Range in South Korea. The procedures help keep the helicopter clean and prevent corrosion.

Recently, the last Army mission for the OH-58D Kiowa Warrior came to an end. The helicopter is being replaced by AH-64 Apache attack helicopters.

Col. Erik Gilbert, commander of the 82nd Airborne's combat aviation brigade, told Military.com that the Vietnam War-era Kiowa was known for its versatility, but that the Apache has more speed, durability and firepower, and "is just a far more capable platform."

The Kiowa maintenance NCOs of 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, were proud to be part of the Kiowa's final mission. Based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, they spent nine months in South Korea being the last to work on the helicopters.



A member of the Kiowa maintenance crew of 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, sits in the cockpit to help conduct a rocket pod firing check on a Kiowa Warrior helicopter in December at the Rodriguez Live Fire Range in South Korea.

Sgt. Johnray Velasquez, crew chief of C Troop, 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, was part of that final Kiowa mission.

“We have the last Kiowas,” Velasquez said. “We’re in charge of closing everything down as far as Kiowa stuff goes, turning in all the parts that have been around here, aircraft, everything that has to do with Kiowa in Korea. We’re in charge of turning it in, while also maintaining our flight missions.”



A member of the Kiowa maintenance crew of 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, conducts a rocket pod firing check on a Kiowa Warrior helicopter in December at the Rodriguez Live Fire Range in South Korea.

The Kiowa crew NCOs and Soldiers now have to make a transition, either to work on the Apaches, or to a completely new career field. Kiowa engineers and mechanics with MOSs 15J and 15S will have to reclassify to their corresponding Apache specialties, 15Y and 15R.

“A lot of our guys have gotten transitions, but some of us have not,” Velasquez said. “There are still opportunities for us to get new MOSs, and I’m going to stay in aviation. I came into the military in aviation almost nine years ago, so I’m trying to keep on. It’s what I know and where I feel comfortable.”

Job to do

Though a forced career change can be distracting, the NCOs know their final mission in Korea is important, said Staff Sgt. Brandon Sutton, a 15S helicopter repairer with C Troop, 1st Squadron.

“This group is 100 percent to the end,” Sutton said. “We’re not going to compromise anything, whether it be quality, support — anything. Some of us have transitions already. Some of us are looking to transition when we get to Fort Bragg. But right now, we’re in Korea, and we’re doing our job as best as we can for the troops in support of the Korean people.”

Velasquez agreed that his crew understood the importance of staying focused on the mission, even while acknowledging a story is ending.

“We still have pilots who are flying, and our job is still dangerous,” he said. “Up until the last day, there could be a dangerous situation, so we have to make sure we’re staying focused and not getting complacent. Just because the aircraft is going away doesn’t mean we can let up on those kinds of things.”



Sgt. Johnray Velasquez, left, assists as members of the Kiowa maintenance crew of 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, work on a Kiowa Warrior helicopter in December at the Rodriguez Live Fire Range in South Korea. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

Though the Kiowa is going away, Velasquez said his crew was still learning important and transferable skills during the final mission in Korea.

“The Kiowa is going away, but aviation is not,” he said. “They still get to train on calling in aircraft, and that’s the same for a UH-60 Black Hawk, an Apache or a Kiowa. Calling in air support is what they’re training on. So even though the Kiowa is going away, we’re still getting them good training on that sort of stuff. A lot of these guys are going to go work on the Apaches, so even though the Kiowa airframe is going away, there is still going to be an aviation field. And a lot of the mechanical part of it is not exactly the same, but it’s similar. You still maintain the helicopters, focus on safety. All the big safety features still apply, so it makes it easier for them to transition.”

Saying goodbye

Though they learned valuable lessons about aviation and Korean culture, the Kiowa crews will be sad to say goodbye to their mission.

“It’s a pretty big deal for us,” Velasquez said. “Every time we talk to the ground guys, they tell us, ‘The Kiowas were our favorite, and we enjoyed working with them.’ It makes you feel pretty cool and sad at the same time, because it’s going away.

“They tell us stories about how the Kiowas helped them during deployments,” he said. “It definitely makes it easier to come out here. It’s been fun to help them, and we get to see a show here, too. We get to see the tanks shooting. I had never seen a tank shoot, so that was pretty cool for me. So it’s been fun for them, and fun for us, too.”

Sgt. Donald Sooga, a fire support NCO on a Korean rotation with the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, said his brigade had definitely enjoyed one last mission with the Kiowas.

“It’s pretty exciting out here,” Sooga said. “For example, the Kiowas at the rear are already processed out, so we don’t have them anymore. While we’re here in Korea, they still have them, so it’s always fun to have something old that we used to have, never played with and we get to play with it out here.”

Sutton said the end will be hard: “I know for all the people on the ground, the Kiowas will be missed.”

It’s the Apache era now, and, as the official Army song says, “You will always know, that the Army goes rolling along.”