

US Fed News

'TEDDY TROOPERS' PERFORM AIRBORNE MISSION IN IRAQ

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CAMP TAJI, Iraq, July 18 -- The U.S. Army issued the following press release:

They can be seen parachuting into various areas around Baghdad bringing smiles to the faces of Iraqi children.

These airborne "Soldiers" are actually "Teddy Troopers" or "Para-Bears," stuffed animals with makeshift parachutes jumping into the arms and hearts of children during Operation Teddy Drop.

The commander for this unique operation is Chief Warrant Officer 04 Randy M. Kirgiss, pilot for C. Company, 4th Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment (Assault Helicopter).

Kirgiss began the operation in mid-April, inspired by previous humanitarian efforts he had witnessed, as well as by Col. **Gail Halvorsen**, the "Berlin Candy Bomber" who dropped candy to German children during the Berlin Airlift.

"I got the idea from a lot of my friends who conducted humanitarian missions on some of my previous deployments," Kirgiss said. "In Bosnia, I saw school supplies donated; in Kosovo, teddy bears were given out. I wanted to model something after the Candy Bomber who parachuted bags of candy to kids. It was from this idea that Operation Teddy Drop began."

In order for his airborne humanitarian mission to get off the ground, Kirgiss needed support from his chain of command, his unit, and from friends and family to help him gather the stuffed animals. He received complete support in helping him begin his humanitarian efforts.

"Capt. Kirk, C. Co. commander, and Lt. Col. Haraldsen, 4-3 AHB commander, were very helpful - they wanted this to happen," Kirgiss said. "They were very supportive, and they helped me brainstorm ideas to make the operation run safely and smoothly."

In conjunction with his official flight missions, Kirgiss brings boxes of stuffed animals with makeshift parachutes along with him. When he sees a child down below, he instructs a crew member to drop a Teddy Trooper.

"There is a mission to be done, but dropping bears doesn't take away from that mission," Kirgiss said. "We have the assets to do both our mission and execute Operation Teddy Drop effectively."

Kirgiss originally told a group of eight friends and family members about the operation. He received help in the form of donated stuffed animals and parachute supplies. The original network of eight grew immensely, and Kirgiss began to receive donations from everywhere around the States; receiving old parachutes and boxes of teddy bears. Kirgiss is even getting a donation from a well-known teddy bear manufacturer.

"Originally, I just wanted my friends and families to look into their kid's closet to find old teddy bears to donate," said Kirgiss. "When unit members started talking and my friends started talking, through word of mouth it just got out and now I get donations from everywhere."

Kirgiss spends most of his free time, usually at night, making the parachutes for the Teddy Troopers. The airborne recruits come in all shapes and sizes, so specialized parachutes usually have to be made. Using

material from old, donated parachutes, Kirgiss makes the parachute that is best suited for his troopers so they can complete their mission. It takes Kirgiss approximately three minutes to make each chute.

The unit's largest recruit jumped May 21 as part of the largest drop in the unit's short history.

"We received eight boxes of donated stuffed animals one day. The boxes stacked to my ceiling," Kirgiss said. "The following day we dropped (more than) 200 stuffed animals, including the largest one we have ever received - a bear that was about 3 feet tall and weighed around six pounds. I needed to make a special chute for that trooper."

Kirgiss tries to get the plush toys to all kids, but his main aim is the poorer Iraqi children in the countryside.

"It can be a safety hazard to drop them in the city. We don't want kids running into the streets to get them," said Kirgiss, also the safety officer of the company. "When we can, we try to send the bears to urban and poorer areas, and for each kid we see we send down a bear so there is no fighting among the children."

Sending these Teddy Troopers on their mission is very fulfilling for Kirgiss.

He enjoys seeing the smile on their faces when they get a hold of their new stuffed animals.

"It's a great thing to see, even from 200 feet above," Kirgiss said. "When we see those kids wave and we send down a bear, most kids will not know what it is at first. Some hide behind their parents, some stay back in hesitancy, but once they see that parachute open, they know what it is and go running toward it. Some even catch them before they hit the ground."

More than 900 Para-Bears have jumped since the start of the operation.

It is Kirgiss' hope to continue the humanitarian mission for the duration of his deployment and hopefully pass on the operation to the next aviation unit that comes to Taji.

For Kirgiss, it is a personally gratifying experience to be a part of the operation, and an operation he hopes will have an impact on the future.

"It is something I find very fun and constructive," he said. "Talking about it also helps me stay grounded to my two young children. I can't help but think that somewhere down the line we might be influencing the future decision makers of Iraq. This operation is only a small way to show that we are human and compassionate. We are Soldiers, but we are humane as well."

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