

# AF's largest deployed rescue squadron now in Iraq

by Senior Airman Kerry Solan-Johnson  
332d Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

A one-of-a-kind operation in Iraq is now the largest unit of its type in the world, making the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron the largest combat search and rescue unit since the Vietnam conflict.

The squadron bolstered their assets to accommodate an expanded mission, adding five additional HH-60G Pave Hawks to their inventory, which nearly tripled the squadron's number of aircraft. Crews, consisting of aircrew, pararescue and combat rescue officers known as the "Guardian Angels," grew in number from five to 12, and the squadron's manning doubled to support the mission.

Before the expansion, the 64th ERQS solely supported the combined Air Forces component; their business relied on the misfortune of downed aircrews. Now with added aircraft and crews, they provide combat search and rescue support to Special Operations Command Central, which plans special operations in Iraq.

What these additional missions mean

to the squadron is a bigger role in combat while maintaining the current combat search and rescue capability.

The squadron is on high-alert status and operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Additional manning, however, means there are enough crews to pull day and night shifts, without pulling a crew out of bed, said Lt. Col. James McElhenney, 64th ERQS commander. "These crews mean we have the flexibility to support all of our customers," the colonel said.

The special operation forces-designated component of the 64th ERQS will allow for a faster response time as crews stage at forward areas to support SOF missions.

Staff Sgt. Jason Parker, an aerial gunner with the squadron, believes the expansion is a force enabler for the 64th ERQS.

"The more people we have, the better," said Sergeant Parker, who is deployed from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. "It means more work, but the extra help is better for flying and accomplishing the mission."

The integration of additional Airmen and aircraft took six weeks from the initial request of forces to their arrival at Balad Air Base.

"We worked closely with our home unit to determine what would meet the need," said Colonel McElhenney, who is deployed from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. "It definitely takes the right combination of people and aircraft; you can't use one without the other."

The Air Force, designated by the Defense Department as the lead service for combat search and rescue missions, provides the Defense secretary's office with military planning options for personnel recovery.

Airmen from the 64th ERQS comprise the only CSAR unit in the country. They are a highly-specialized field, made up of an extremely small community of highly-trained professionals who save the people no one else can reach, Colonel McElhenney said.

"It's all part of our mission," said Maj. Kyle Cowherd, 64th ERQS Pave Hawk pilot. "We come in the dark, alone and unafraid, to deliver life."



Photo by Senior Airman James Croxon

**Members of the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron cover a HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter here Wednesday. The 64th ERQS recently expanded their mission, making them the largest combat search and rescue unit since the Vietnam conflict.**