

# The Highs and Lows of Northern Watch

By James Kitfield

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even war.**

**T**HE scene on the runway at Incirlik AB, Turkey, these days often resembles an international air show. Pilots of Operation Northern Watch Combined Task Force come from the United States, both the Air Force and Navy, Britain, and Turkey. Their sleek aircraft provide a truly eclectic mixture of weaponry.

Out come Air Force F-16CJs armed with their distinctive high-speed anti-radiation missiles. Then come F-15C air superiority fighters sporting air-to-air weapons. Next out are the A-10 attack aircraft laden with tank-killer missiles and 30 mm cannon.

Joining the group is a Navy EA-6 tactical jammer. Next are British Jaguar fighters fitted with special photoreconnaissance pods. At the end come a British VC-10K and USAF and Turkish KC-135 aerial tankers and the orchestrator of the day's mission: an Air Force E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft.

This, of course, is no air show. Each "performance" costs \$800,000. The audience does not cheer. It fires advanced surface-to-air missiles and





USAF photo by S/A. James Harper

***An F-16CJ from the 23rd Fighter Squadron—based at Spangdahlem AB, Germany—launches from Incirlik AB, Turkey, in support of Operation Northern Watch.***

anti-aircraft guns. “If the Iraqis didn’t shoot at us this would be a boring mission,” said Brig. Gen. Edward R. Ellis, commander of the Northern Watch task force at Incirlik. “The Iraqi air force won’t dare enter the no-fly zone.”

And shoot they do. “Not only do they shoot at us on nearly every mission,” said Ellis, “but Saddam has put a bounty on our heads, payable to anyone who brings down one of our airplanes. After 10 years the Iraqis have also gotten smarter about parking their air defense weapons near mosques and even in water parks for children, knowing that we won’t strike back at them.”

### **Smarter Version**

It makes for a tense and sometimes deadly game. “Saddam has gotten smarter about our methods,” concluded Ellis, “and he knows we care more about Iraqi civilians than he does. That makes the mission more difficult and sometimes more frustrating.”

In many ways, Northern Watch has become emblematic of the gray, no-war, no-peace zone in which the Air Force finds itself. That ambigu-



**SrA. Charles Shilling, a crew chief from the Louisiana ANG's 159th Fighter Wing, directs an F-15 prior to a launch. USAF pilots face a complex tactical picture over Iraq.**

ous realm poses political and diplomatic constraints that frequently outweigh tactical considerations.

In Northern Watch, restrictive rules of engagement are dictated by Turkey, which is the host nation because of the central importance of Incirlik. Turkey wants to avoid any major confrontation with Iraq. ONW pilots have little latitude for responding aggressively to Iraqi fire.

Moreover, the straight jacket of military and economic sanctions the United States put on Iraq after the Gulf War has steadily frayed over the past decade, greatly complicating the tactical picture in northern Iraq. It is something ONW pilots must constantly monitor.

The average Northern Watch patrol lasts about three hours, though the time "in the box" can be stretched to seven hours with some additional assets. In that period, chances are Iraqi air defense gunners will fire on coalition aircraft somewhere between two and five times, either with surface-to-air missiles or anti-aircraft artillery. Due largely to very restrictive rules of engagement, the chances that Northern Watch pilots will be able to fire back are limited.

Indeed, by far the most unpopular restrictions dictated by Turkey are their rules for responding to Iraqi fire.

Unlike their counterparts on Operation Southern Watch missions, flown primarily from Saudi Arabia, Northern Watch pilots can only counterattack against a specific SAM site



**Brig. Gen. Edward Ellis, Operation Northern Watch commander, performs a preflight check of an F-15 before taking it out on a patrol. The complicated rules of engagement for ONW can be frustrating to pilots, Ellis acknowledged.**

or AAA battery, as opposed to other elements of the Iraqi air defense network.

Even more important, Northern Watch pilots can respond only at the time of an incident and are barred from returning to base to plan a coordinated attack on a provocative Iraqi air defense site.

Add in concerns about collateral damage to civilian structures near air defense sites, and the result is Northern Watch pilots can respond only rarely to Iraqi gunners trying to shoot them down. Over a 10-month period, for instance, Northern Watch

pilots responded only eight times to the Iraqi gunfire that greets virtually all of their patrols.

In June, however, US and British officials reported an increase in Iraqi attacks on coalition aircraft. Officials said there had been 10 separate Iraqi attacks over a two-day period in late June against Northern Watch aircraft. On June 26, coalition fighters dropped precision guided munitions on a portion of the Iraqi integrated air defense system. A few days later, following another Iraqi threat, ONW pilots again responded by dropping precision munitions against the offending Iraqi system.

"Fighter pilots being fighter pilots, there is extreme frustration that we can't be more aggressive in our response to the AAA and SAM fire we see virtually every day," said Lt.

Col. Tim Strawther, commander of an F-16 fighter squadron taking part in Northern Watch.

### The Golden BB

Strawther continued, "I'm proud of the discipline my guys have shown in deciding not to take a shot because the risks of collateral damage were too high or the rules of engagement didn't allow it, but I do worry that the Iraqis are going to get lucky and down one of our people with a 'golden BB.' The Las Vegas odds-makers will tell you that sooner or later your luck will change."

Concern that Iraqi air defense gunners will eventually get lucky, or mechanical failure will force a US aircrew down inside Iraq, permeates Northern Watch. One F-16 pilot involved in a Northern Watch mission did suffer engine failure that forced him to eject, but he was picked up by a US search-and-rescue helicopter. In another incident, an EA-6 Prowler on the way home from Northern Watch experienced catastrophic engine failure that forced its crew to eject.

Individuals at US Air Forces in Europe, which oversees USAF forces in ONW, maintain that Turkey's desire to avoid any move that might be interpreted as an escalation has also prompted Ankara to veto the requested deployment to Incirlik of U-2 reconnaissance airplanes and even the use of towed decoys to protect Western aircraft.

Predictably, such restrictions rub many pilots the wrong way. The Incirlik oddsmakers believe it is only a matter of time before someone comes up snake eyes.

"I know the rules of engagement are sometimes frustrating for my pilots, whose natural reaction when they get shot at is to want to go level something," said Ellis. "But anyone who thinks that military action shouldn't be governed by political constraints is naive. The political reality is we're not at war with Iraq at this point, and if we reacted rashly we could force the hand or limit the options of US policy-makers who are trying to figure out what to do about Saddam Hussein."

Having said that, Ellis went on to note, "There is merit to the argument that the policy-makers might want to address this issue sooner rather than later because of the inherent jeopardy of this mission. The bottom line is: We continue to fly and the Iraqis continue to shoot at us. Nobody should be especially surprised if eventually they happen to hit something."

These so-called operations other than war have a schizophrenic nature. They combine certain aspects of a permanent duty station with some of an emergency deployment. In the case of the northern no-fly zone, Air Force pilots have flown nearly 21,000 sorties in a decade of continuous operations, more than in the entire Korean War. Even so, Air Force personnel generally rotate through on



USAF photo by TSgt. Cecil D. Daw Jr.

**US officials take extraordinary precautions to prevent losses over Iraqi territory. An EA-6B crew was lucky a catastrophic engine failure came after they completed a mission.**

90-day temporary-duty cycles. They live in an elaborate tent city. Ellis said the average annual turnover rate for personnel involved in the operation is a staggering 900 percent.

In Northern Watch, as in so many other ongoing operations, the Air Force is also struggling to provide Low-Density, High-Demand assets—airborne early warning aircraft, command-and-control platforms, electronic countermeasures aircraft, air base security units—which are must-have items.

### Fighting Complacency

Finally, the long duration of the Northern Watch mission, and the fact that so many Air Force personnel have rotated to the assignment multiple times, can make the mission seem routine and take the edge off day-to-day flying. As in other gray-area missions, Northern Watch commanders wage a constant battle against complacency.

Everyone understands a Northern Watch mishap could provoke an international incident, even war. Iraqi forces fire at ONW aircraft 34 times a month, on average. In Northern Watch, pilots go to war with Iraq a little bit each day.

The studied quiet inside the darkened Combined Air Operations Center at Incirlik belies the hectic pace of ongoing operations. At any one time, the 45 or so personnel in the CAOC are juggling three operational cycles—advanced planning three

days in advance of a Northern Watch patrol, fine-tuning of the next day's mission, and close monitoring of patrols in the air that day. The CAOC each month plans about 18 Northern Watch patrols, on average. Of these, an average of 13 actually take place. The operational cycle can seem never-ending.

Mission planners say the most important safety item is unpredictability. "Saddam has a very robust early warning system of radars that track our movements, so we try and mix it up as much as possible by flying different profiles and going to different places on each mission," said one CAOC shift commander, who like most persons interviewed for this article will remain unnamed for security reasons. "We also rely heavily on our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets—be they overhead satellites or recon aircraft—to avoid those places where we know Saddam has air defense weapons. If someone has a gun, the best course is to stay out of its range."

Bitter experience has taught the Iraqis not to use their integrated air defense radars to "paint" Northern Watch aircraft; that can easily lead to a bullet between the eyes. However, nearly every Northern Watch mission will attract what American intelligence analysts call Iraqi "science projects."

"The Iraqis have become very innovative at taking various parts and



**Restrictive rules mean Northern Watch pilots rarely can respond to Iraqi gunners trying to shoot them down. Here, an F-15E from the 48th Fighter Wing, RAF Lakenheath, UK, has returned to Incirlik from an ONW mission.**

pieces of their air defense weapons and combining them to create something new to throw at us,” said the CAOC commander. “He may take a booster element from one surface-to-air missile and combine it with the guidance system of another or adapt an air-to-air missile and figure out how to launch it from a truck.

“These science projects are much less accurate than an integrated air defense system, but our pilots still have to dodge these giant bullets that come up at them on nearly every mission. It’s also widely understood that Baghdad has offered bounties on our pilots, and everyone knows that Saddam would consider it a huge feather in his cap to parade a US airman through the streets of the city.”

**More Autonomy**

In the decade-long and potentially lethal game of cat-and-mouse covering the northern no-fly zone, Air Force commanders have also noticed that the Iraqis these days have more autonomy to act independently of Baghdad.

“My counterpart in the fourth air defense sector in northern Iraq has evolved more decentralized control,” said Ellis, an F-16 pilot who routinely engages in Northern Watch patrols. “In the early years, almost all actions were controlled out of Baghdad, and Saddam kept a very tight grip. Today, my counterpart

clearly has the ability to move his air defense elements around and employ them as he sees fit. The mission has also become more complicated as a result of far more commercial traffic and other activities than existed in the early years.”

A striking aspect of Northern Watch is the degree to which the sanctions designed to limit Saddam Hussein’s freedom of action have steadily eroded.

Once, Iraqi territory and airspace north of the 36th parallel were calm and quiet. Now, the area is crisscrossed by commercial air traffic and

thriving land trade between Baghdad and its neighbors.

This marks a big change from the days when anything that flew in the northern no-fly zone was fair game. Now, ONW pilots must distinguish Iraqi bogies from regular international commercial flights between Syria and Iraq and domestic civilian flights between Baghdad and the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Defensive counterstrikes must steer clear of a rail line running between southern Turkey and inner Iraq. Likewise, US pilots must avoid strikes near an oil pipeline linking Iraq and Turkey.

The United Nations approved limited use of helicopters for crop dusting in the northern no-fly zone. Predictably, Iraq has continued with unauthorized helicopter crop-dusting flights, raising the specter of nerve gas attacks such as those Saddam launched against Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s.

Helicopter flights also played a pivotal role in crushing the uprisings against the Iraqi regime that followed the Gulf War. Opposition Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north captured 14 of Iraq’s 18 provinces before Saddam Hussein struck back.

Lt. Col. Lee Alexander and other Reservists from the 513th Air Control Group, Tinker AFB, Okla., are walking poster boys for the strains real-world contingencies such as Northern Watch are placing on the



**The Northern Watch complement includes British aircraft, such as this Jaguar fitted with special photoreconnaissance pods, USAF, US Navy, and Turkish aircraft.**

Air Force, especially on those units that operate Low-Density, High-Demand assets such as the AWACS aircraft. In 1999, two months after the 513th's air arm, the 970th Airborne Air Control Squadron, reached initial operational capability, it was activated for the Kosovo air war. Its recent activation after the Sept. 11 attacks was its second active duty call-up in three years.

"As soon as the attacks of Sept. 11 took place, I knew that it was just a matter of time before we were activated," said Alexander. "I immediately packed my clothes, locked down my apartment, and headed for Tinker, because whatever the United States' response was, I knew it would require the AWACS."

Alexander, a United Airlines pilot in his civilian life, was sent to command the Incirlik-based detachment of the 970th AACS. On Sept. 11, volunteer crews flew a 22-hour mission, he said, and aircrews have been going virtually nonstop ever since. On Sept. 20, the official activation order came through.

### Retention Concerns

Because AWACS aircraft and crews are both scarce and in high demand, two Reserve crews from the 970th will handle Incirlik operations for six months, thus relieving active duty crews for deployment to Central Asia and other theaters. Rather than deploy like their active duty counterparts for a full 90-day cycle, the Reservists will switch out with other Reserve crews in 45-day cycles, the better to minimize disruption to civilian careers.

The Reservists of the 513th were eager to pitch in after the Sept. 11 attacks, but they concede that the nearly nonstop pace of operations is causing serious strains.

"The fact that we've essentially undergone back-to-back activations ... has raised some concerns about retention," said Alexander. "I worry that it might be tougher to get some of our top people to re-up when the time comes. People pay a price when they are gone from their jobs and career tracks for such long periods. The longer the unit is activated and



USAF photo by SSgt. Scottie T. McCord

**AWACS is one of the scarce assets crucial to Northern Watch and other operations around the world. Here, airmen deployed from Tinker AFB, Okla., prepare to launch an AWACS aircraft at Incirlik for an ONW tour.**

the more it affects jobs and families, the harder it will be on the unit as a whole."

Other LD/HD assets required for Northern Watch include air base security units. While the Sept. 11 attacks increased threat-condition levels for virtually all US military units, the war on terror and Incirlik's proximity to the volatile Middle East and Central Asian theaters make security a continuing concern. In the 1990s Turkey also fought its own bloody war against Kurdish terrorists, raising concerns about residual terror cells in the region.

"We're guests on a Turkish air base here," said Ellis, "and the Turkish police do a great job guarding the gates and fence line. Inside that perimeter, our own security forces and force protection measures make us feel pretty secure."

Turkish officials are highly sensitive to the political dangers of Northern Watch, and they do not wish to gratuitously inflame Turkey's overwhelmingly Muslim population. That explains why the mission continues to carry temporary duty status 10 years after no-fly zone operations began.

The Incirlik tent city ranks among the most impressive anywhere in the Air Force. It has air-conditioned

tents, private vestibules, a fully equipped morale and welfare center, swimming pools, volleyball and basketball courts, barbecue facilities, and more. Still, the base has the atmosphere of a hardship posting. The Air Force's permanently stationed 39th Wing handles all base operations, freeing Joint Task Force personnel to concentrate on the Northern Watch mission.

The conditions are not stellar, but USAF officials worry more about the 900 percent turnover rate in personnel every year. Officials say the Expeditionary Air and Space Force system has helped by pairing units scheduled to deploy to Northern Watch together in the predeployment training cycle.

"The quality of our great Air Force people, and the fact that they are trained and ready the day they arrive at Incirlik, is what allows us to manage that 900 percent turnover rate," said Ellis.

He went on, "What I tell my people is that our host country views this as a contingency operation, and as long as that's the case, we'll lack more permanent facilities. As long as we wear this uniform, however, and our country thinks it's important that we enforce the no-fly zone over Iraq, we'll keep doing this mission—whether it takes five months, five years, or five decades. Look at Korea. People expected we'd be finished there quickly, and we're still there 50 years later." ■

*James Kitfield is the defense correspondent for National Journal in Washington, D.C. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "The Guard and Reserve Step Up," appeared in the January 2002 issue.*