

Iraqi Flight Training School takes off

By U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Christopher Frost

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KIRKUK, Iraq – Pull back and the trees get smaller; push forward and the trees get bigger. It's a simple explanation for flying that pilots give when talking about the similarities between flying different airplanes. It's also a foundation that former regime pilots worked from when they returned to the Iraqi Air Force as flight instructors in the country's first flight school since Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

The Iraqi Flight Training School located in Kirkuk, Iraq, is training officers to fly fixed and rotary wing aircraft and producing the future pilots of the Iraqi Air Force.

"After the war, I felt sad for my air force," said Iraqi Air Force Col. Karim, the commander of the Iraqi Flight Training School. "I thought it would take 25 years to rebuild the air force. The air force seemed so far away."

The actual time it took to get Iraqis into the air was much less. The school opened in October and within six months, the school had a commander, airplanes, instructors and students to fly them.

"We've had a phenomenal amount of progress since we've been here," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Mark Bennett, commander of the 52nd Expeditionary Flying Training Squadron. The squadron advises the Iraqi flight school and helps to train pilots.

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An Iraqi pilot student performs a pre-operation check prior to beginning a training session in one of the squadron's many Cessna 172s.



A Cessna 172, operated by the Iraqi Flight Training School here, sits on the flightline in Kirjuk, Iraq. The Cessna contains advanced avionics, which includes "glass cockpit" technology and a Garmin GPS system.

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An Iraqi pilot student reviews a checklist with U.S. Air Force Capt. Terry Bloom, an advisor with the 52nd Expeditionary Flight Training Squadron, prior to beginning a training session in one of the squadron's many Cessna 172 simulators. The simulators come complete with the same advanced avionics suite that is included in the real airplanes.

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Fighter pilots from Saddam Hussein's regime were the first pilots to go through the training and become instructor pilots for the school. This allows the Iraqis to slowly take over the training and push the Coalition advisors out of the training process.

"They're really good pilots and really good instructors," said Bennett.

To date, the Iraqi instructor pilots are flying about a quarter of all training sorties and all of the flight scheduling. The Iraqis even handle the scheduling of their Coalition counterparts. By December 2008, Iraqis are expected to take control over 90 percent of the entire training program.

Even though these are sorties to train pilots, the area that they fly in is still considered a combat zone, and the pilots log combat hours every time they hit the sky.

The pilots train and are trained in Cessna 172s, aircraft that were purchased via Foreign Military Sales, a program

that allows the government of Iraq to purchase military equipment with their own money from foreign countries.

Even though the aircraft model is typical of flight training all over the world, the technology on board each plane gives the new Iraqi Air Force an increased capability never before seen in the air force, said Karim, a pilot with nearly 3,000 hours of flight time in the Iraqi Air Force.

Each aircraft carries a glass cockpit avionics suite, which allows information normally displayed on several instruments to be contained in one large LED screen in front of the pilot. The avionics of the plane also includes a GPS system, allowing the pilot to easily navigate from point to point. Lastly, the engine consumes diesel fuel rather than typical aviation gas.

Aside from the fixed-wing training, the school is also expected to begin basic helicopter training when helicopters arrive.

"When I see the school in front of me, it was very near," said Karim about the Iraqi Air Force. "I was so happy. Six months, not 25 years – it was different." ■