



The Last Gray Apache

By Maj. Scott Bell

S.C. National Guard Historian

Ever heard of the Blue Dragons of Death? It's the name Iraqis gave the unique gray-colored Apaches of the South Carolina Army National Guard's (SCARNG) 1st of the 151st Attack Reconnaissance Battalion (ARB) during the unit's 2004 deployment into Mosul.

The history of the gray Apaches began as an experiment in 2003, when the U.S. Army began looking at ways to reduce the

risk of surface-to-air fire for aviators serving in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

"One of the options the Army pursued was using alternate paint schemes," said Brig. Gen. Les Eisner, the Deputy Adjutant General of the S.C. National Guard. Eisner, who was serving as 51st Aviation Group commander and S.C. director of aviation safety, at the time, was preparing the 1st of the 151st ARB for an upcoming deployment to Iraq.

Both he and Lt. Col. Ed McKee, commander for the 1st of the 151st ARB, asked the National Guard Bureau and the Apache Program Manager's permission to paint 14 of their AH-64A Apache aircraft an experimental two-tone gray scheme. They thought the color might blend in better with the sky over Iraq and give their pilots an advantage in battle. Following the plans approval, the aircraft became the first and only Apaches to be contracted and painted the experimental color by the U.S. Navy.

When the unit deployed to Iraq in 2004, the gray Apaches garnered a lot of attention upon arriving in Kuwait. Although they looked like Navy aircraft, they were – of course — Army aircraft. As they flew their aircraft into Iraq for the first time, the 1st of the 151st aviators didn't realize they would be the only ones to ever fly gray AH-64s in combat.

Upon the unit's arrival in Mosul, insurgents controlled several parts of the city and it was a hotbed of enemy activity. The soldiers were initially supposed to have a two-week train up period. Instead, within 24 hours upon arrival in Iraq, the S.C. aviators were proving the accuracy of their motto — "Ready to Strike" — flying combat operations and receiving fire in support of the 1st Stryker Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (Light). The aircraft soon earned the nickname "Blue Dragons of Death" because of their stealth-like ability to be on top of the enemy before the insurgency could react adequately.

"The gray Apaches had an immediate and lasting impact and contributed to bringing the situation under control," said Lt. Col. Ray Davis, the unit's operations officer. He thinks

Photo by Master Sgt. Ed Snyder, S.C. Air National Guard Public Affairs



the gray Apaches assisted his unit in accomplishing their mission of keeping soldiers on the ground out of harm's way. "It got to the point soldiers in the dining facility were coming up to us and thanking us, because they knew the enemy wouldn't shoot at them if we were overhead," said Davis.

Of the 14 aircraft originally deployed into Iraq, all of them sustained some form of surface-to-air fire. One had to be evacuated for repair because they didn't have the capability of repairing it in-theater. Another was destroyed in an accident. The unit replaced the two gray aircraft with two standard Army green Apaches. In comparing the two paint schemes, Davis feels the gray Apaches gave the unit several advantages but the primary one — is the fact — their color made it more difficult for insurgents on the ground to see them coming.

The gray Apaches also proved to be easier to repair because the experimental color made the skin temperature about 20-30 degrees cooler than the

standard Army green paint scheme. Reports from maintenance personnel in Iraq indicated the 1st of the 151st ARB also had fewer avionics issues with the gray Apaches because the temperature both inside and outside of the aircraft was reduced.

During their deployment, the gray Apaches gained some repute. A Japanese model company made 5,000 gray Apache models and included decals of the 1st of the 151st's signature Palmetto tree for modelers to apply to the engines.

At the end of the unit's rotation, the Army closed the loophole for approving alternative paint-schemes. Future color experiments must now be approved by the Department of the Army. Currently, the S.C. Army National Guard's 14 gray Apaches remain the only Apaches to ever fly in combat utilizing the experimental two-tone gray scheme.

Since the beginning of this year, most of the gray Apaches have now been sent back to the remanufacturing plant to be

converted to the newer D-models. According to Eisner, they will continue serving the needs of the U.S. Army but will be repainted Army green. Several of the remaining gray Apaches, including the last one S.C. aviators flew (which departed McEntire Joint National Guard Base on March 20), will continue to serve in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard until they are also converted to the newer D-model Apache.

Although the Army may have ended this nostalgic chapter in the history of the experimental gray-colored Apache, it is noteworthy to mention — the new CH-47F Chinook — will have an alternative light-tan paint scheme. "Regardless of ones viewpoint on gray or tan versus green, the gray Apache was a plausible response to the threats of surface to air fire and the means to mitigate it," said Eisner. He feels all of the "Ready to Strike" Soldiers can be proud of the role they played in the gray Apache's chapter in SCARNG and U.S. Army aviation history. **AF**

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