

“The Congo: Like a Pearl in the Dust”

Army aviators take their Congo deployment in stride – Always ready

Kinshasa . - What does Kinshasa look like from above, from a helicopter? German Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hafer knows: “...like a tarnished 5-Mark piece!”. In a quiet voice the Army aviator describes the sunlight in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which glares down mercilessly on the many dusty roofs of a truly big city. He has come to know it well since mid-June. Up north in Germany, in Laupheim in Baden-Wurtemberg, Hafer normally serves as the commander of Flying Group 251.

But the crews of the three Sikorsky CH-53 helicopters seldom have opportunity to take a relaxed look out over the countryside. Of course, the many cargo and reconnaissance flights for EUFOR over the Congo require undivided attention, not just from the pilots – but also for the gunners on board. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a country that seems like a pearl in the dust. That is why EUFOR DR CONGO has the mission of providing security for free elections in this Central African country.

### **The Army Aviator’s Africa**

The Army aviators have their base on the south side of N’Dolo Airport in the Congolese capital Kinshasa. From the camp they drive or walk over the airport’s runway, where not only civilian aircraft take off and land. A new stoplight separates the multinational EU camp from the Army aviation base. The risk of being hit on the runway by an airplane was just too big.

A kind of airplane cemetery provides a distraction on the walk over. Next to the German Bundeswehr’s shelter decommissioned aircraft have been rusting way for years. Their paint is flaking off. What airline the DC 10 with no windows once belonged to is a mystery that will probably never be solved. Many things are inhospitable here; that is the Army aviator’s Africa.

### **Right in the Middle, but still on the Outside**

The hangar offers some protection. But fine, red desert sand lies on the smooth floor. Resistance is futile. The clean, blue white-painted building with its massive, high steel beams has a balustrade at rotor-height. In the offices up there is where the planning is done, underneath the inspections and repair work go on – or both above and below, procedures are practiced to that all of the Army aviator are, so to speak, playing from the same sheet of music. What radio frequencies to use on operations is only just the beginning.

That notwithstanding, the atmosphere is one of silent concentration. Mechanics work on the engines. Meanwhile, tractor drivers are making a tight turn to move a CH-53 toward the runway, so that one of the three helicopters with the prominent yellow EUFOR markings and the European flag on its sides can take its place at the helipad 25 meters in front of the hangar. The show might begin at any moment. That’s how it seems. The impression would not even be that wrong: the helicopters belong to the so-called “Medevac Flight”, a patient transportation unit. If a

report of seriously wounded or injured should come in, things need to move quickly by day or night.

Professionals are at work here, calm professionals.

**“Don’t drive yourself nuts”**

Thomas Hafer says meanwhile: “Soldiers absolutely need to feel informed about the current situation.” That gives them a feeling of day-to-day confidence, and it is one of the foundations, upon which the good reputation the multinational EUFOR RD CONGO continent has made for itself locally is built. Taking stock of the aviators of the German Army here near the equator, Lieutenant Colonel Hafer thinks the reason why they are so content is “because they never drive themselves nuts for no reason”.

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Image captions:

1.

Showing the flag: Army aviators at work by day and night

2.

Thomas Hafer: Commander in Africa’s evening sun