

# ARMY GUARD HELICOPTERS PRIMED FOR SOUTHWEST BORDER DUTY

**Text & Photos by Sgt. Jim Greenhill**

National Guard Bureau

**THE** first of three-dozen upgraded and overhauled OH-58 Kiowa helicopters are scheduled to arrive on the U.S. border with Mexico in April to boost the National Guard's support to the U.S. Border Patrol in Operation Jump Start.

The majority— 22 of the Vietnam-era aircraft— are being refitted at the Mississippi Army National Guard's 1108th Aviation Classification Repair Activity Depot (AVCRAD) at the Trent Lott National Guard Training Complex near the Gulf of Mexico.

Other Kiowas are being worked on at the National Guard's three other AVCRADs in California, Connecticut and Missouri. AVCRADs provide depot-level maintenance to Army National Guard aircraft. The 1108th AVCRAD serves nine southeastern states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Up to 6,000 National Guard Soldiers and Airmen are assisting the Border Patrol on the nation's southwest border. President George Bush announced Operation Jump Start (OJS) in May 2006. National Guard Bureau officials say the helicopters will provide a significant boost to the air surveillance part of the

mission as the operation to deter illegal immigrants from entering this country begins its second year.

Like the proverbial cat, the Army's scout helicopter introduced in 1968 keeps being reincarnated in the National Guard. After conducting final flight testing March 23 on one of the first Kiowas prepared for the border mission, Maj. Bille Miller, supervisory maintenance test pilot, explained:

"The aircraft we just flew in was a 1971 model airframe. So, what's the return on investment? That aircraft has been flying for 36 years, and now it's been upgraded into a different configuration."

Unique to the National Guard, the four AVCRADs have wrung decades more service out of the relatively low-cost Kiowas than the aircrafts' originally projected 20-year lives.

For the border mission, where the Kiowas will help boost the Border Patrol's ability to spot and interdict those who traffic in people and drugs, the aircraft are being upgraded with a



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*A Vietnam-era OH-58 Kiowa. Thirty-six Kiowas are being upgraded and overhauled at the National Guard's four AVCRADs for Operation Jump Start (OJS), the National Guard's mission to assist the Border Patrol in securing the U.S. border with Mexico.*



*Staff Sgt. Russ Williams works on an Army National Guard OH-58 Kiowa helicopter wiring harness at the Mississippi Army National Guard's 1108th Aviation Classification and Repair Depot (AVCRAD) in Gulfport, Miss., on March 22, 2007.*

half-dozen 21st-century law enforcement devices.

The upgrades include radios that enable National Guard Citizen-Soldiers to communicate with Border Patrol agents and other civilian law enforcement officers; moving maps that show pilots and passengers exactly where they are; radar altimeters that give the exact height above the ground during flight; night vision equipment; and a two-million candlepower spotlights.

Higher skids are being fitted to raise the height of the helicopter. The aircraft are being rewired, fitted with new monitors and mechanically scrutinized from their rotor blades to their undercarriages.

"Upgrading it to these new systems is going to help the pilots tremendously," said Ronald Groce, a civilian contractor with the AVCRAD whose military career included surviving 13 helicopter crashes during two tours in Vietnam. He rejoined the 1108th AVCRAD as a civilian after retiring from a 28-year National Guard career.

"Everything we're doing enhances their flying capabilities," said Sgt. 1st Class Charlie Bond, an avionics mechanic. Some examples:

The moving map increases navigational accuracy by day and night. "A police officer can type in an address in the back seat or you can type it in in the front seat and it will take you from point A to point B," Miller said. During the journey, passengers can follow geographical and manmade features on computer map monitors.

The night vision equipment makes the helicopters— which can be flown so that it can barely be heard from the ground— useful at night. "We can ... see people moving because of their heat signatures," Miller said. "We can find people at night on the border."

The spotlight allows Citizen-Soldiers to illuminate suspected smugglers or illegal aliens while they guide Border Patrol agents on the ground in for the apprehension, communicating on radios that can be heard by multiple agencies.

One day in late March, the 1108th AVCRAD's cavernous

hangar echoed with the sounds of machine tools as Citizen-Soldiers and civilian contractors labored to ready more Kiowas. Some made dashboard parts from sheets of aluminum in a machine shop. Some lay underneath Kiowas, threading yards of wiring to power new gadgets. Others reached into a cramped space in the cockpit to move a magnetic compass six rivets back because Miller had discovered during test flights that new monitors made it impossible for pilots to see the compass in its old position.

"These guys come in young and we train them and they stay with an airframe [that] moves them from the journeyman level of aircraft mechanic into what I would consider a craftsman," Miller said.

"It's a real good mission," said Staff Sgt. Dan Morton as he bundled a wiring harness. "We're all working hard to get these aircraft ready. Right now, we get to show who we are."

It's not the first time Mississippi has led the way with a new Kiowa incarnation. Miller also was the test pilot when 76 Kiowas were refitted for the Army Guard's Counterdrug Reconnaissance And Interdiction Detachments, the RAID program.

"We had the most experience with OH-58s," explained Maj. Daryl Gilbert, the AVCRAD's production control officer.

The Kiowas can have a one or two-person crew, with the option of law enforcement officers also riding on missions. "Because it's a single-pilot aircraft, you have a little more flexibility," Gilbert said.

They have about a two-hour range with the added weight of the latest tools for the border mission. The aircraft is considered cheaper to operate and maintain than many other helicopters, and it requires less fuel.

The Citizen-Soldiers of the 1108th AVCRAD have juggled deployments to Operation Iraqi Freedom and recovery from Hurricane Katrina— which damaged troops' homes and the hangar where they work— in addition to their contribution to the OJS mission. 

*Staff Sgt. Harold Compton (left) and Staff Sgt. Dennis Tillery work on Army National Guard OH-58 Kiowa helicopters.*

