

55th Wing ever vigilant

1/12/2007 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA/OFFUTT AFB, Neb.** -- Most military units rotate through the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in cycles ranging from four months to one year. After each deployment, the squadron returns to their home base for training and reconstitution.

But the members of the 55th Wing's 55th Operations Group and 55th Aircraft Maintenance Unit from Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, have sustained one long deployment - for more than 16 years.

The Wing marked 6,000 consecutive days deployed on Thursday. It's believed to be the longest single deployment in U.S. Air Force history.

"This 6,000-day milestone is a real testament to the tremendous patriotism and commitment of the aircrews and maintainers of the 55th Wing," said Lt. Col. Doug Sachs, Commander of the 763rd Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, the 55th Wing's designation while in Middle East. "Their unwavering vigilance over the years has added invaluable - even lifesaving - intelligence services to our warfighting commanders and the nation's leadership in the cause of freedom."

The wing was helping to keep the skies over Iraq safe for U.S. and Coalition forces for more than 10 straight years when 9/11 struck. In that time, U.S. planes patrolling the Northern Watch and Southern Watch fly zones were often fired upon by Saddam's forces on the ground. They failed to damage or down a plane, but the environment was hostile and dangerous, keeping the 55th on its toes in its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance mission for comrades in all military branches.

In the weeks following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S., President George Bush and other national leaders told the American people the Global War on Terror could last two generations - 30 years or more. That message has not changed.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said in a speech to the Belmont Club in Dec. 2005, "President Bush and anyone knowledgeable on what is called the GWOT unequivocally state that this conflict will last a very, very, very long time..."

"Under hostile conditions such as enemy fire, the men and women of the 55th have been serving quietly and heroically - saving coalition lives in the interest of national security," said Col. Philip Smith, 55th Operations Group commander.

Aircrews and maintainers assigned to the specialized RC-135 airframe leave for Southwest Asia about three times each year for virtually their entire military career. Some began as young officers and enlisted when the RC-135 Rivet Joint aircraft first left for Saudi Arabia on Aug. 9th, 1990, days after Saddam invaded Kuwait; they're now senior leaders at the little-known squadron.

The RC-135 Rivet Joint squadron, nicknamed "Sundawgs," operates from an undisclosed location in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

"The value of the RC-135 Rivet Joint as an intelligence-gathering platform was proven during Desert Storm," explained Lt. Col. Sachs. "Since then, the aircraft's capabilities have transitioned from a Cold War asset to an important part of our modern terrorist-fighting force."

The 55th Wing has been operating above max surge since the inception of Operation Enduring Freedom. This sustained effort represents a massive training challenge for the 55th Wing.

"The aircraft we use to fight are the same aircraft we use to train, and as I said, we're a rapidly evolving platform. In order to remain an effective terrorist-fighting force, we not only must train on the latest aircraft upgrades, we must also properly train and grow Airmen to operate in the rapidly evolving battle space we face today" said Lt. Col. Sachs. "The challenge we face is that Combatant Commanders need the information we offer."

The RC-135 Rivet Joint is an extensively modified Boeing C-135 aircraft (a militarized version of the Boeing 707) packed with an on-board sensor suite, allowing the mission crew to detect, identify and

geolocate signals throughout the electromagnetic spectrum.

The 25-person mission crew can then forward gathered information in a variety of formats to a wide range of users via the Rivet Joint's extensive communications suite.

Having been deployed continuously for such a long period has led to several creative solutions to manage manpower and aircraft. Instead of following the standard Air Expeditionary Force rotation schedule used throughout the Air Force, the 55th Operations Group, the largest operations group in the Air Force, works a 60 days on/60 days off schedule.

It's not uncommon for Airmen assigned to the unit to have multiple deployments with their squadron. For example, Tech. Sgt. Troy Manges, an assistant training monitor with the 55th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, has served on 16 deployments, totaling five years deployed with the RC-135 Rivet Joint.

"The real heroes of this milestone are the families that have endured this grueling schedule throughout these sixteen-plus years, and continue to support our team," said Capt. Rabi David, 55th Aircraft Maintenance Unit Officer in Charge.

"The dedicated aircrew and aircraft maintainers in these units are committed to this job for one reason: they know they're making a difference every day in the strength of the Air Force by providing intelligence to the warfighter," added Captain David.

"As a vital part of our force structure, the Rivet Joint aircraft and aircrew are always in high demand" said Lt. Gen. Gary North, Commander of U.S. Central Command Air Forces. "These Airmen and their families are truly the embodiment of 'Service before self.'"

"Airmen have kept this streak going, on the ground and in the air. Airmen continue to make this mission a success. Airmen have made the difference," added General North.