

Joint STARS pass 20,000 hour flying mark in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom

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STAEDLER

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Only three and a half months after reaching the 20,000 flying hour milestone for combat hours flown in the Area of Responsibility, the 12th Expeditionary Airborne Command and Control Squadron has made history again, this time solely in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Soaring on a clear November night 30,000 feet above Iraq, the

22 crewmembers aboard the Boeing 707 E-8 Joint Stars aircraft passed 20,000 flying hours.

“To me it’s more than just a number,” said Lt. Col. Henry Cyr, commander of the 12th EACCS. “It represents an enduring presence of a Joint STARS overhead during OIF. Add it up and that turns into several years of continuous coverage to forces on the ground.”

In doing the math, 20,000 hours actually adds up to 833 days of flying time since the war

started in early 2003. The flying is a team effort, shared on 90-day rotations between the 12th EACCS, the 16th EACCS and the 128th EACCS — all stationed at Robins Air Force Base.

The Joint STARS is an airborne battle management aircraft specializing in command and control, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance gathering. Information gathered can be passed in real time to troops on the ground conducting

► see JOINT STARS, 2A



U.S. Air Force photo by SENIOR AIRMAN RICKY BEST
Staff Sgt. Mark Porter and Senior Airman Nicole LaGrow, both with the 12th Expeditionary Airborne Command and Control Squadron, upload software as they perform radio and computer checks in preparation for a flight.

JOINT STARS

Continued from 1A

combat operations.

Much of the intelligence collected during ISR missions are compliments of a 24-foot long radar underneath the aircraft, which gives crew members on the flight the ability to scan an area several hundred miles or zoom into a precise location for closer inspection.

Colonel Cyr said the Joint STARS strength is being able to monitor and play back radar over a specific locale and provide analysis of an event that took place in that area. This information can be passed down to ground troops to assist them in carrying out their missions more safely and effectively.

"Troops on the ground never had radar flying of this capability over head before and because of that they can fine tune their operations," Colonel Cyr said of what the Joint STARS bring to the fight. "Instead of looking around scattered shot on the ground we can direct them to a particular area and look at those

locations more in depth."

The missions accomplished during the past 20,000 flying hours have evolved to meet changing dynamics of the war in Iraq. Initially, Joint STARS was called to provide direct combat support for ground troops as they made their way into Iraq. From there the role changed slightly to supporting convoys and other assets on the ground, but that mission was switched to other aircraft in the AOR better suited to handle those scenarios. Now, Joint STARS is flying mostly ISR missions.

A key component of the Joint STARS is the diversity in its team. Truly a blended wing, the three squadrons are comprised of active duty and Guard Airmen. Flights also have Army and, in the past, Marines on board working together to fulfill its role of supporting ground troops.

Tech. Sgt. Authur Yancey, a radar surveillance technician with the 379th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is full time Guard member with 23 years of service, the last 10 with

the Georgia Air National Guard. A cross-trainee from a B-1 bomber career field into Joint STARS just three years ago, he said the capabilities of the aircraft and its technologies are "awe inspiring."

"I'm always learning something new every day with this career field," Sergeant Yancey said. "This radar system is phenomenal."

And it is using that "phenomenal" radar system, and the collective efforts of the three squadrons that make the Joint STARS an extremely reliable, consistent asset in the AOR in supporting ground troops. Twenty thousand hours later, the mission is still going strong and contributing to troops up range.

"I'm just glad to be doing something for my country," said Capt. Paul Farlow, 12th EACCS who piloted the 707 on its milestone mission Thursday. "My father was a Korean War veteran and he instilled in me a sense of pride in giving something back to your country.

"Twenty thousand flying hours — a lot of good is coming out of that."