

Reconnaissance aircraft, team reach milestone

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1/11/2007 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA (AFNEWS)** -- It may not have the stealthy skin of the B-2 Spirit or be able to hover vertically like the CV-22 Osprey, but the RC-135 Rivet Joint is the only aircraft that Airmen can claim to be deployed continuously for 6,000 days.

This milestone can be touted by Airmen in the 763rd Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, the 55th Operations Group and the 55th Aircraft Maintenance Unit at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb. The unit designation has changed over the last 16 years, but the mission focus has remained the same.

No matter whether it is called the Junk Yard Dog, Jungle Assassin, Fair Warning or Don't Bet on It, the Rivet Joint aircraft, as it's more commonly known, has maintained a presence in Southwest Asia since Aug. 9, 1990. Many of the RC-135s have been affectionately named during its tenure in the 55th Wing. Nose art, which was once visible from the outside, now can be found on the inside for the aircraft's corresponding tail number.

And while the RC-135 doesn't carry bombs or fly at mach speeds, its aircrews can eavesdrop on the enemy. This allows for other U.S. and coalition aircraft to stop the enemy in its tracks.

"We're getting a lot accomplished and helping with the fight," said Capt. Todd Williams, 763rd ERS tactical coordinator deployed from the 38th Reconnaissance Squadron at Offutt AFB. "I can't think of another platform that has been contributing as long as the Rivet Joint has and is always able to produce something to get to the guys on the ground."

The Airmen call this aircraft their "mile-high office," and over the years, it has changed in many ways. The RC-135 originally was outfitted with small TF-33 engines that were more than 30 years old; the cockpit with round-dial gauges. Now, the aircraft has larger, more powerful engines and new glass TV-like automated avionics on the flight deck, making it on par with some of today's most advanced airliners.

"The mission and the aircraft are both dynamic entities, constantly changing," said Capt. Guy Perrow, 763rd ERS aircraft commander also deployed from the 38th RS. "When I began flying this aircraft, the round-dial system was entirely manual and analog, requiring one to read between the lines and mentally picture the entire flight plan from a God's-eye view using the data presented. With the new glass equipment, we're able to accurately display our position, timing and other information that has aided in our situational awareness.

"The upgraded features of the aircraft allow us to conduct our mission in a safer, more reliable fashion," he said. "We dedicate more of our efforts to fighting the war on terror, knowing our platform is capable of whatever we require of it."

Its mission also has evolved to meet the demands of today's battlefields. From early missions as a Cold War-era reconnaissance aircraft, the RC-135 now is fitted to contribute valuable intelligence to contingency and sensitive operations around the world.

The 44-year-old reconnaissance aircraft began converting to its current configuration in 1964. The retrofitted Boeing 707 weighs nearly 150 tons, carries an extensive inventory of electronics and a crew of 34. The first RC-135V variant went into service Aug. 8, 1973, while the newest RC-135 was added to the Air Force inventory in November 2006, bringing the total to 17. At any given time, a third of the fleet is in theater, a third are at Offutt AFB training aircrews and preparing to deploy, while the remainder are in depot maintenance facilities undergoing upgrades or refurbishment.

"These guys are rock stars without a mass following; but they do have an avid fan-base ... on the battlefield and at the decision-maker (general officer) level," said Lt. Col. Doug Sachs, 763rd ERS commander, deployed from the 82nd RS at Kadena Air Base, Japan.

Squadron Airmen have adapted to an ever-present deployment schedule, since they don't follow the

regular Air Expeditionary Force rotation. Aircrew and maintainers alternate into theater on a 60-day on/60-day off cycle. This means anyone assigned to the unit could be deployed three times a year or more. The team deploys from Offutt AFB; Royal Air Force Mildenhall, United Kingdom; and Kadena AB.

The front- and back-end maintainers, both military and civilian, and pilots and mission crews collectively keep the RC-135 flying.

"This platform has so many different entities coming together to make one mission," said Staff Sgt. Steven Lantz, 55th AMU RC-135 crew chief.

Rivet Joint aircrews supported operations around the world until the fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s. Since then, the RC-135 community has been used in every operation in Southwest Asia from operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm to the current operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The fleet and its crew are very adaptable; the aircraft can support the strategic, operational and tactical level of warfare on a single mission.

"During Desert Storm and Desert Shield, the jet was primarily a highly sensitive platform," said Master Sgt. Denny Nichols, 763rd ERS airborne mission supervisor deployed from the 97th Intelligence Squadron at Offutt AFB. "A lot of folks didn't even know we existed. Now, we're working with other assets and services. We can actually get out there and give information directly to the folks who need it and they know who we are now."

Sergeant Nichols has been involved with the RC-135 for almost 20 years and has deployed nearly 25 times, which totals more than 1,000 days.

"We're supporting the small tactical units on the ground," he said. "We can go direct to the warfighter via voice or chat and give them a heads-up to a threat in their area."

The RC-135 is configured with communication and computer systems stacked floor to ceiling and running the entire length of the plane. The equipment alone weighs about 40 tons. Highly skilled Airmen use this equipment to scout the battlefield and to help "find the bad guys." Airmen in the 763rd ERS, also known as "Sundawgs," live by their motto: "Always on the hunt."

Everything the aircrews and maintainers do helps ensure the RC-135s continue to fly and communicate information to the tactical fighters on the ground.

"The aviators, officer and enlisted, care about their job and know it's a job worth doing," Colonel Sachs said. "They recognize and understand the importance of the mission and the intelligence they gather to military's success against today's war on terrorism."

"The assets we train with are the ones we fight with," he said. "Combatant commanders have a near-insatiable demand for our platform and Airmen, yet the 55th Wing must maintain the training pipeline to sustain the long-term effort, and to train combat-mission ready crews on the latest platform modifications. It's a real testament to the Fightin' Fifty Fifth's warriors that we've made this mission happen over the long haul."

"Without tenacity, persistence and a tremendous amount of 'service before self,' we wouldn't have met this milestone," Colonel Sachs said. "Pausing to look back at our history and understanding the heritage of the Rivet Joint airframe and people, we're better able to prepare for the horizons ahead."