

6,000 'winning days'

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1/19/2007 - **OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, Neb.** -- The 55th Wing commemorated a combat airpower milestone in front of several hundred Offutt and community members Jan. 11 - 6,000 continuous days of Rivet Joint service in the Southwest Asia area of responsibility.

Reflecting on the role of the 55th Wing and Rivet Joint airframe in combat operations from Desert Shield to Southern Watch and continuing in the Global War on Terror, 55th Wing Commander Brig. Gen. Jonathan George put the significance of the achievement into perspective for those gathered at the Bennie Davis Maintenance Facility.

From Aug. 9, 1990 to Jan. 11, 2007 the wing logged "6,000 consecutive winning days providing courage up front in the face of adversity ... providing air power to give a glimmer of hope to an oppressed people," the general said. "That's 16 and a half years that this wing has, day in and day out without a break, provided winning combat operations in the Middle East."

To further put the milestone into perspective, the wing asked the first Rivet Joint Detachment commander in the area of responsibility to speak during the event.

"It's a privilege to be selected ... to represent the past," said retired Col. David R. Wolfe. "How did it start almost 16 and a half years ago? A lot of people in this room probably hadn't even thought of the military at that time and had no idea what this wing did."

It was Aug. 4, 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. The next day, the national command authority alerted the 55th that it was on alert, the colonel recalled. Three days later, a deployment order was issued and Colonel Wolfe was selected as the commander for the deploying Rivet Joint contingent. On Aug. 9, the colonel and 57 others landed in Saudi Arabia. Overcoming barriers such as lack of lodging, support facilities and an inability to speak the local language, Colonel Wolfe and his team began flying combat missions within 48 hours, thus beginning the 6,000 day milestone.

Also attending the ceremony to speak to those gathered was a current 55th Wing member whose career has grown and evolved with the 55th Wing.

Lt. Col. Mike Kelly, 338th Combat Training Squadron director of operations, had just pinned on his silver first lieutenant bars and was the youngest of three electronic combat officers in his unit when he found himself on the second Rivet Joint aircraft to land in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of Operation Desert Shield.

"The previous year, the Rivet Joint had really broken new ground integrating with combat air forces ... exercising, watching over fighters and bombers flying over simulated targets on the Nellis (AFB, Nev.) range. Threat radar locations and enemy situation were being passed to friendly aircraft in near real time. This type of direct integration was a revolutionary change from the slow, formalized reporting that normally took days or even weeks," the lieutenant colonel said.

His crew and others involved in the training exercises weren't aware of how important "this new role would become," Colonel Kelly said.

Remembering the atmosphere at the end of Operation Desert Storm, Colonel Kelly recalled the victory parades that welcomed back redeploying troops but noted "for the 55th Wing and the RC-135, the number of crews and aircraft would be reduced but never completely redeployed.

"More than 16 years, 6,000 days after that first flight in 1990, dedicated men and women of the Fightin' Fifty-Fifth are still deployed in Southwest Asia selflessly conducting their mission," Colonel Kelly said.

"I'm proud of every one of them and even more proud to be part of it," the colonel said. It takes determination, commitment and sometimes some sacrifices to put the welfare of others before

ourselves, according to General George, and that "is not lost on this community."

Although unable to attend the ceremony, Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel and Rep. Lee Terry sent messages of commemoration.

"It is important to remember those who have sacrificed so much for the cause of freedom," Senator Hagel wrote. "The men and women of the 55th Wing have earned our highest respect and gratitude. The Fightin' Fifty-Fifth continues to be a source of pride and inspiration to all Americans."

In his letter, Congressman Terry penned, "Sixteen years is a very long time to be deployed in the Southwest Asia area of operations but the 55th has served its nation there with honor, dedication to duty and the highest degree of professional expertise."

While much of the commemoration reflected on the past, the event culminated with a ceremonial passing of a sword from Colonel Kelly to Airman 1st Class Gary Chappell symbolizing the 55th Wing's constant changing of the guard as the "tip of the sword" in the area of responsibility.

Airman Chappell, a member of the 55th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is the youngest Airman to return from the wing's latest deployment.

The sword used was a gift from Saudi air force Brig. Gen. Rogi, commander of Riyadh AB, Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s. The sword, inscribed with the words "Fighting as a team, winning as a team" is on permanent display at Offutt Dougherty Conference Center.

"This unit - somewhere in the number of 10,000 who have participated in this unbroken chain of success - does not come back like conquering heroes from past military engagements, pockets aren't lined with gold and silver ... you come and go as long as it takes to do the right thing. And the right thing, as these warriors know, is to defend freedom and to guard hope," General George said.