

55th Wing marks 6,000 days in Southwest Asia

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1/12/2007 - **OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, Neb. (AFNEWS)** -- For the men and women assigned to the 55th Wing, an intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and command and control unit here, there's a saying about their 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year mission of supporting intelligence operations somewhere around the world.

"The sun never sets on the 'Fightin' Fifty-Fifth'" is a slogan that gained much more prominence Jan. 11 during a ceremony commemorating the milestone set by the RC-135 Rivet Joint crews and maintainers of 6,000 straight days of deployment by someone within the 55th Wing.

Members of the wing's 55th Operations Group and 55th Aircraft Maintenance Unit here have sustained one continuous deployment -- for more than 16 years.

In opening remarks by Brig. Gen. Jonathan D. George, commander of the 55th Wing, he defined the group by stating, "Some people are meant for more, and that's the definition of all of you warriors, patriots, citizens, family members and friends."

The general went on to say that "the actions of the 55th Wing, men and women, military and civilian, active and those who that have gone on before -- you're defending freedom, you're guarding hope -- those actions have been pure, and will remain pure."

The aircrew and maintainers assigned to this version of the C-135, the Air Force version of the venerable Boeing 707, average 3.1 deployments per year, equating to a 60 days on-60 days off cycle, virtually for their entire military career.

After a resounding performance of the national anthem by the U.S. Air Force Heartland of America Band Night Wing, retired Col. David "Tiny" Wolfe, the first Rivet Joint detachment commander in the Middle East in 1990, reflected back to what it was like to start this venture. He talked of that time 16 years ago when the unit faced the odds of having limited personnel, resources and a tremendous language barrier in a country with unbearable heat.

Glenn Freeman, a representative for Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel, read Senator Hagel's message of how the "Fightin' Fifty Fifth" continues to be a source of pride and inspiration to all Americans. Acknowledging the hardships faced by the unit, Mr. Freeman closed by quoting President John F. Kennedy, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Several of those in attendance started with the unit as young Airmen and officers and now are senior leaders at the little-known squadron. Lt. Col. Mike Kelly, the current 338th Combat Training Squadron director of operations, was a crew member as a lieutenant on the second RC-135 mission in August 1990.

"I am proud to have been a part of the mission and continue to be proud of the men and women who now are serving the mission," he said.

The high point of the ceremony was the passing of the sword from Colonel Kelly to Airman 1st Class Gary Chappell from the 55th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. Airman Chappell was the youngest Airman to return from the latest deployment to the Middle East. The sword being passed was a gift from Brig. Gen. Rogi, former Saudi Air Force commander at Riyadh Air Base, Saudi Arabia, in March 1991.

It was dedicated to wing personnel as a symbol of the wing's dedication and perseverance to the fight. It is inscribed "Fighting as a Team, Winning as a Team."

"I am honored to be a part of this incredible milestone," said Airman Chappell. "To be the one to receive the sword from Lt. Col. Kelly really means a lot to me."

After the ceremony, the first Rivet Joint to deploy to the Middle East Aug. 9, 1990, was parked on display. With its extensive antennae array, the Rivet Joint aircraft has the capability to provide direct, near real-time reconnaissance information and electronic warfare support to theater commanders around the world.