Air Combat Command NEWS SERVICE

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Search begins for crashed B-1

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A U.S. Navy Swath was flown here in support of Operation Enduring Freedom Jan. 15 on its maiden voyage aboard a C-5A Galaxy from Travis AFB, Calif. The four-year-old craft, designed specifically to fit inside a C-5, was brought here to survey and map the ocean floor where a B-1 crashed Dec 12. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Note: Click on photo for higher-resolution copy.

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (ACCNS) -- Elements of the U.S. Air Force, Navy and Republic of Korea navy have joined forces at a deployed location to determine if a 28th Air Expeditionary Wing B-1 that crashed Dec. 12 can be recovered from the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

The Air Force Safety Investigation Board convened here to examine all of the facts surrounding the accident, but most of the facts are at the bottom of the ocean. The team is working with the U.S. Navy and the Korean navy who are surveying and mapping the ocean floor where the B-1 went down to see if anything can be salvaged.

The plan, developed by experts from the Air Force and both navies, called for an initial survey and imagery of the crash site. The most effective means to accomplish the survey was through the use of sonar to locate sections of the bomber and underwater photography to determine their condition. An on-site platform for food, fuel and communication was also required.

A U.S. Navy mine hunter and explosive ordinance disposal craft, called a small water area twin hull or Swath, was brought in for the survey and mapping. It was flown here Jan. 15 by a C-5A Galaxy from the 60th Air Mobility Wing at Travis AFB, Calif. The craft is designed to counter ocean swells with hydraulics in the twin hulls that reach deep under water, creating a stable platform for delicate operations.

A group of 13 Navy specialists from Explosive Ordinance Division Mobile Unit Seven, San Diego, operate the Swath. The team is made up of EOD, craft operators, mobile communications, and two “skippers.” They specialize in underwater explosive ordinance disposal and have the necessary equipment to “see” underwater.

The four-year-old Swath “was designed to fit inside a C-5 and has been tested once to see if it would

(fit), but it has never flown anywhere before now," said Navy Lt. Rick Fratus, the officer in charge of the team.

The team's equipment includes side-scan sonar towed behind the Swath that sends its signal to a television monitor onboard. When an item is located that resembles the bomber, they'll send a remote operated vehicle, or rover, capable of depths to 2,000 feet to the ocean floor to capture video of the item. The process will continue until all of the known pieces and locations are recorded on an ocean survey chart.

"Our primary job is searching for hazards in harbors, things like mines," said Fratus. "This is an interesting use of the Swath, supporting a salvage operation, but it's very capable of performing the mission."

The Korean navy provided the stationary platform at the crash site -- Landing Ship Tank No. 683. This "mother ship" will host the investigation board members. They will be able to see all the information from the Swath.

The Korean mission here, named Operation Ocean Star, is described as a peaceful crossing of the ocean to help protect the freedom of the world and fight against terrorism; the sailors follow the stars across the ocean for true course and guidance, said Lt. Cmdr. Han Bu-Sik, a public affairs officer.

LST No. 683 is a 171-crewmember vessel designed to carry amphibious tanks into shallow waters for assaults by sea. The ship has a flat bottom that floats three meters below the surface. The bomber is believed to be on or near a shallow coral reef.

"We are able to use the LST to our advantage because it is capable of conducting operations in the shallow water where the B-1 downed," said Han. "Moreover, the LST also has big spaces for equipment storage, and capability of accommodations for additional crews.

"This (location) is quite far away from the Korea peninsula," said Han. "It is very significant (for our country) that a ROK ship came all the way across the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean to (here)."

"Since (this) is the first time to conduct the actual search operation with the U.S. Navy and the Air Force, we will try to use this opportunity to improve our ability in various aspects," said Han.

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