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Unit puts the 'deploy' in 'deployment order'

By 2nd Lt. Anna Siegel
Air Combat Command Public Affairs

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, Va. (ACCNS) -- The media broadcast images of jets launching and bombs dropping during Operation Iraqi Freedom, showing Air Force people doing what they're trained to do. What most viewers didn't see were the people responsible for getting those jets over there to put bombs on targets and patrol the skies.

The Aircraft Delivery Operations function of the ACC Air Operations Squadron here is the Department of Defense's executive agent for worldwide aircraft delivery, coordinating movement of fighter and bomber aircraft for the Air Force, Navy, Marines and allied forces.

"Think of us as travel agents for the military," said Lt. Col. Dan Drejza, the director of operations for the Air Operations Squadron. "When a deployment order gets published, we see to it that the aircraft, the 'iron,' get to their in-theater operating locations."

"We do the flight planning, request diplomatic clearances, coordinate with stop-over bases, as well as airspace altitude reservations for refueling operations," said Col. Dan Shelor, the AOS commander. "We also coordinate with Air Mobility Command's Tanker Airlift Control Center for the tankers."

The AOS also runs the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, the Air Operations Weather Flight and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty Tracking and Reporting System Element. It was primarily the Aircraft Delivery Operations function, however, that helped the AOS recently earn an Air Force Organizational Excellence Award.

Besides the flights at Langley, the AOS has two detachments overseas: one at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, and the other at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

The Langley-based flights and detachments planned, coordinated, and directed deployments for aircraft with the full spectrum of mission capabilities for OIF -- a total of more than 360 combat aircraft, more than 2,500 sortie generations, and more than 5,000 individual air refueling operations -- all in three months.

The experience of the AOS team, comprising military, civil service, and contractor personnel, and the computer software they use are vital to the success of the mission, said Colonel Shelor.

Nine civilian contractors, all retired Air Force members, work in Aircraft Delivery Operations, he said. Most of them worked for the AOS before retiring. The transformation from military positions to contractors saved the Air Force 11 military positions, freeing six rated officers for other missions.

"We develop the profile for the mission," said Doug Martin, one of the civil service planners, who came to work one day in a flight suit and the next in khakis and a polo shirt. "We basically give the pilots a map and a flight plan that tells them which direction to go and when to get some gas. If they don't get gas from the tanker, we give them a piece of concrete to land on."

"We use the most sophisticated flight planning software anywhere," Colonel Shelor said. "It's one of a kind. It actually computes fuel requirements on a second-by-second basis on up to six airplanes flying off of a single tanker. It tells the pilot when to cycle each individual airplane onto the boom to get some gas, and how much gas to take in order to always have enough fuel to divert to a designated recovery base, if they have a problem. To try to do that manually would be unbelievably difficult."

"Once the mission has been planned and tasked, it gets turned over to a delivery control officer for final planning and the detailed coordination and pre-launch preparations," he said. "They go to the departure base, brief the pilots and actually direct the launch of the aircraft. They're on the road a lot."

There are 12 DCOs at Langley, and 6 each at Ramstein and Hickam, who take the plan to the warfighter for on-site coordination, Colonel Drejza said.

A team of enlisted airfield management craftsmen with flight operations planning and airspace utilization experience support each of the three locations. They also manage the libraries of flight information publications that provide critical in-flight and base support information to the DCOs and the deploying aircrews they serve.

One of the DCOs goes to the wing that's deploying and brief the squadron, wing leadership and all the crews, Colonel Shelor said. They coordinate with the tankers, the operational weather squadrons and other agencies, such as the local base operations and the Federal Aviation Administration.

"There are very specific airspace requirements that have to be met when there are large numbers of aircraft flying in formation, particularly when there's air refueling involved," he said. "We have to make what's called altitude reservations to do that, wherever that happens to be in the world, and that makes it a fairly complex issue to deal with."

Aircraft Delivery Operations has another accomplishment to be proud of in its support of OIF, Colonel Shelor said. They coordinated the first ever deployment of B-2 Spirit bombers to a forward location and custom built support packages for B-1 Lancer and B-52 Stratofortress bombers.

"Historically, bombers didn't deploy, they flew from home and they came back and landed at home," he said. "They have the capability to do that still. Of course, in some cases, it makes more sense to get them closer to the fight, which is what they did this time with quite a few B-1s, B-52s and a small number of B-2s."

Aircraft Delivery Operations' support doesn't stop with Air Force fighters or even bombers, he said.

"The Navy and Marines don't have the capability to do this type of mission planning, that's why we help them, too," Colonel Drejza said. "Ship-assigned assets may use our service to get to where they can embark onto the ship. We were even recently asked to move planes from one carrier to another, one in the Indian Ocean and the other in the Persian Gulf."

In addition to deploying the planes for contingency operations like Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the Aircraft Delivery Operations function is responsible for moving aircraft for steady

state operations, like the former Operations Northern and Southern Watch, scheduled maintenance, exercises, air shows and training. They also deliver the aircraft sold or deployed under the Foreign Military Sales program.

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