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By Senior Airman Francine St. Laurent,
168th Air Refueling Wing

A squadron is born: new mission springboards fresh career fields

EIELSON AIR FORCE BASE, Alaska — Airmen in the 168th Air Refueling Wing Civil Engineering Element will soon make history as they build a foundation for a new civil engineering squadron.

In August 2014, the National Guard Bureau released a study outlining organizational changes for wings across the nation. The goal is to standardize sizes and types of organizations needed to support wings of similar sizes, said Lt. Col. Scott Howard, 168th Mission Support Group commander.

For the 168th Air Refueling Wing, it means the birth of a new mission and a new squadron: 168th Civil Engineering Squadron Prime BEEF mission.

Prime BEEF missions — prime meaning “first force” and BEEF standing for “base engineer emergency force” — respond to state natural hazard emergencies, support humanitarian missions and aid natural disaster response abroad.

“You’re creating a team that can go in and, from nothing, create a livable and habitable space for anybody, be it for humanitarian or military, and a functional augmentation to emergency response,” said Senior Master Sgt. Scott Stewart, 168th Civil Engineering Element facilities superintendent.

It will be one of two Prime BEEF missions in the state.

CE Airmen specialize in electrical systems; electrical power production; heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration systems; emergency management; pavement and construction equipment; structures, water and fuel system maintenance; operations management; engineering and civil engineering — a total of nine career fields the 168th Air Refueling Wing has never before offered.

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In becoming a squadron, the element must grow from its current four members to 62 Airmen, presenting a great challenge for recruiting efforts, Howard said.

The 168th ARW recruiting team brings roughly 85 new Airmen to the Wing every year, said Master Sgt. Dianna Miller, 168th ARW recruiting office supervisor. With the increased manpower, recruiters will need to fill 130 additional positions.

Due to the termination of the 477th Fighter Group Prime BEEF mission, 10 CE Airmen plan to join the 168th ARW, Miller said. Their valuable skillsets will aid in the formation of the 168th ARW Prime BEEF mission.

"Because they already have experience and training, they will not need to be sent to school and will really help start the new squadron," Miller said.

The variety of career fields in CE offer new career options for people in construction and trade schools in Fairbanks, Miller said.

"It's an opportunity for young men and women. The only way they would get good solid training is to go into a union," Stewart said. "If they didn't have that opportunity, this might be another way to get into that program."

Training Airmen in these career fields will be a hurdle. Many Airmen will need to travel to other units to advance their skills through training unavailable on Eielson AFB, such as operating heavy equipment, Stewart said.

The squadron will be located in the current CE building, which may require an interior remodel to accommodate the growing staff. They will join the 20 State of Alaska employees who support the 168th CE element.

Stewart looks forward to the team-building CE Airmen will experience as their squadron grows, he said.

"We're all going to rely upon each other on how to build what we want to build," Stewart said. "How many people can say that coming into a new job?"

He is hopeful the squadron will have a core, trained team in three to four years and can begin deploying.

The official designation as a squadron awaits approval of an organizational change request the 168th ARW submitted to NGB.

Along with 56 available positions, the 168th ARW is currently hiring a 168th Civil Engineering commander and Prime BEEF manager. Contact a 168th Air Refueling Wing recruiter to learn more about career opportunities in civil engineering.

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