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Alaska National Guard
Release: 16-006

Jan. 26, 2016

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Arctic Terns fly south for winter

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska —The Arctic tern is a seabird native to both Arctic and subarctic regions. Of its many traits, the tern is known for its long-range migratory patterns. Here, there is another flock of terns that frequent the skies — the 249th Airlift Squadron of the Alaska Air National Guard, and this year, they migrated south on board their C-17 Globemaster III aircraft to Gulfport, Mississippi, on a simulated deployment for their two-week annual training Jan. 8-18.

Exercise Tern Migration was an opportunity for the Terns, as the 249th AS is known, to practice a squadron-wide deployment, according to Lt. Col. Ken Radford, director of operations, 249th AS.

“We typically don’t get to deploy as a squadron,” said Radford. “Typically, we send one crew at a time. We wanted to exercise the scenario of our whole squadron deploying together to see if we could meet that capability in the event we got that call.”

Based out of the Mississippi Air National Guard-operated Combat Readiness Training Center at the Gulfport International Airport, the Terns and their support crew from the 176th Maintenance Group and the 176th Operations Support Squadron were busy training on a host of different missions including assault zone training, low level training, approach at unfamiliar airports, as well as a simulated astronaut rescue mission in the Atlantic Ocean.

The rescue mission was a joint effort between the 920th Rescue Wing; Detachment 3, 45th Operations Group; and the 45th Space Wing, all based out of Patrick Air Force Base, Florida; NASA; and the Alaska ANG.

Speaking to the astronaut rescue mission, Tim O’Brien, with NASA’s Ground and Mission Operations Office, explained the importance of working with Department of Defense assets.

“Exercises like this are extremely important to the development of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP’s) for the DoD forces as well as practicing and refining communication protocols between the flight crew and ground support teams, both NASA and DoD,” he said. “While Air Force pararescuemen jumped from the C-17 aircraft and practiced their hands-on skills, real-time coordination took place between those rescue forces, a simulated flight crew, the aircraft and NASA/DoD command centers in order to execute a safe rescue scenario. Every time we conduct an exercise like this, we learn and improve our processes.”

The 249th AS is no stranger to working with pararescue assets. The Terns are co-located with the 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons of the Alaska ANG, and have been developing long range search and rescue TTP’s to support their rescue missions. Typically, C-17s perform strategic airlift missions, and this developing capability contributed to the 249th AS being selected to support the astronaut rescue

exercise.

“From my understanding, this was the first simulated astronaut rescue mission out of a C-17,” said Radford.

Flying from Mississippi to Florida, two C-17s landed at Patrick Air Force Base and picked up personnel and equipment from the 304th and 308th Rescue Squadrons – both from the 920th Rescue Wing – and loaded them up for the mission. Additionally, there was a pararescueman from the 212th Rescue Squadron in each of the C-17s.

“The [212th RQS Pararescuemen] were there because they are intimately familiar with rescue tactics, training and procedures from a C-17,” added Radford, “and the 304th and 308th had limited experience with the C-17.”

Aside from dropping the Guardian Angel teams (made up of pararescuemen and combat rescue officers) and their equipment at the astronaut’s location, they also tested the ability to communicate directly with ground units during the mission.

“We tested the pararecuemen's portable radios by connecting them to aircraft antennas,” said Radford. “This helps turn any aircraft into a combat search and rescue aircraft and allows us to talk directly to the survivor, ascertaining important information such as their status, position, threats and extraction information. Even if the survivor is unable to talk, you can still extract information from their radio. We were able to establish communication with the survivor from over 45 miles.”

All in all, he explained, the exercise was a success. This sentiment was consistent with the entire annual training, which he described as being very busy.

"It was excellent training," said Radford. "We flew more sorties in seven days than we would at our home station. We had planned for 17, but two cancelled, and so we executed 15 missions. With only two aircraft and a limited number of maintenance support personnel, that's a pretty good undertaking."

Other missions included flying to Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, picking up Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division and performing joint airborne air transportability training. They also flew to Oklahoma to perform medical evacuation training, and performed seven air refueling missions with four different air refueling units over the course of Exercise Tern Migration.

“It was a monumental time,” added Radford. “It was really good to see all of us come together to deploy as a squadron.”

“It was a very large effort, with all of our drill status Guardsmen taking on additional duties to make it happen,” he said. “From various projects, building missions and planning sorties, the entire thing was just awesome to see.”

PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (accessible from .mil computers.)
<https://www.dvidshub.net/image/2372494/arctic-terns-fly-south-winter#.Vqqw200UWpp>

