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By Staff Sgt. Edward Eagerton

More than 100 Alaska Guardsmen deploy to Middle East

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — More than 100 members of the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Wing deployed this week to the Middle East in support of Operation Inherent Resolve.

Most of the deployed Guardsmen are members of the Wing's 144th Airlift Squadron, who operate the C-130H "Hercules" tactical-airlift aircraft. Additionally, personnel from the 176th Maintenance Squadron, the 176th Logistics Readiness Squadron, the 176th Communications Flight and a handful of support specialists from other Wing units deployed with the C-130s to provide various supporting roles.

"Leading these guys into combat has been a dream of mine," said Lt. Col. Michael Cummings, commander of the 144th AS. "Now I finally get to do that, and because it might be the last one, it's a little bittersweet; you want to be able to come back and hand it off to somebody else, but it is a great honor."

Tactical airlift has been one of the 176th Wing's core missions since 1957, when the Air Guard's emphasis shifted from air combat to airlift. However, a current proposal at the national level has been put forth to divest the 176th Wing of its C-130H tactical-airlift aircraft.

The current proposal was put forward and recommended by retired Lt. Gen. Stanley Clarke III, director of the Air National Guard, to the Total Force Continuum (a board of active, Reserve, and Guard members tasked to try to balance requirements, capabilities, risk, and cost regarding strategic plans and programs). The Total Force Continuum is taking action to push forward Clarke's proposal. As such, this deployment could conceivably be the last for the 144th Airlift Squadron, at least in its current form.

"It's one of those things you have to embrace," said Cummings, pointing to a plaque on his wall featuring photos of the various aircraft flown by the 144th AS over the course of the unit's history. "Those are the all the different planes that the 144th have flown. We're the same group, just doing different things. If this is the last C-130 deployment for us, we hope to make it a great one."

Once the Guardsmen reach their destination, they anticipate a busy schedule, filled with a number of different missions.

"They will be providing any number of capabilities to the combatant commander," explained Maj. Kirby Chacon, who will be acting as the 144th AS commander for the remainder of the unit not departing for this deployment. "They'll be hauling troops and cargo throughout their area of responsibility. Their missions could also include humanitarian and medevac missions as the situation requires."

Chacon explained that the C-130 is a versatile aircraft capable of supporting a number of different missions in various environments.

“The C-130 is a great asset within theater,” he explained. “It’s a tactical airlift platform.

“There are pros and cons to every weapon system, and that’s where C-130s excel. We can land on dirt airstrips that are less than 1,000 feet long at high terrain. Be it the mountains of Afghanistan or the ice fields of Greenland or Antarctica, the C-130s are there to do the mission.”

The Alaska Guardsmen deployed four C-130s and are linking up with the Ohio Air National Guard, who are also bringing an additional four C-130s and personnel, said Capt. Eric Rutter, maintenance operations officer, 176th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, who will be leading the combined Alaska and Ohio aircraft maintenance team while deployed.

Rutter explained some of the complexities of keeping the aircraft mission ready while deployed.

“Providing mission capable aircraft on a daily basis is my mission,” he said, “and I know we can do it. This model C-130, the H series, is considered a legacy aircraft.

“In simpler terms, it’s becoming obsolete, and with that, parts procurement is much more difficult. In theater, there previously was the capability to repair engines and propellers, and that has now gone away.”

Rutter explained that because of the difficulties in maintaining an aircraft reaching retirement age, it has caused them to be more dependent on supply chains and other Reserve units.

“I believe that we have the best supply system in the world,” he said, “and we are very capable of getting parts to where they are needed, but the challenges will probably be higher than they’ve ever been before.”

Regardless of the specific job each Guardsman performs, the consistent sentiment was that the Alaska Air Guardsmen were ready for the mission. This, in part, was due to a high amount of training and exercises leading up to the deployment, according to Cummings.

“This group is ready to go,” said Cummings. “They’re motivated and prepared.

“Last year, we took part in exercise Red Flag, the Pacific Airlift Rally, and we sent planes to Japan and New Zealand. We absolutely packed the last six months with training, and we’ve asked a lot of these folks. Then to cap it all off with another four months in the desert, they’ve given a lot, but all of that hard work helped to prepare them for this deployment, and I feel like we’re ready and we’re going to accomplish the mission and get everybody back safely.”

Rutter added that he felt the level of experience they are taking with them will contribute to making the mission a success. He also explained that he is excited to take first-time deployers as well.

“I’m looking forward to taking some people to theater who have never been deployed before,” he said. “They signed up and want to do the mission, but they had to get trained before they could go, so I’m looking forward to seeing how they do.”

Being that this could be the final deployment for the 144th AS as a C-130 unit, many of the unit’s members feel the significance of this deployment, explained Cummings.

“C-130 people are C-130 people to the core,” he said. “It’s interesting as we look towards the transition, and of course we’re keeping a positive attitude. In the end, it doesn’t matter what mission we do. We’re still the 144th – we’re still the Wolf Pack.”

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and photos.
2. **DVIDS link** includes story and photos. (DVIDS is generally accessible from .mil computers)
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