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Maintenance Airmen critical part of Alaska Guard Africa deployment

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — An eagle swallowing a dragonfly whole is rather what it looks like when an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter is loaded into the cargo hold of a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft.

The load operation was a ballet of coordinated precision as 176th Maintenance Group maintainers worked with 210th Rescue Squadron HH-60 and 144th Airlift Squadron C-17 aircrew to meticulously ferry the helicopter into the Globemaster without damaging either aircraft.

The pre-deployment operation was part of a massive effort undertaken by 176th MXG Airmen who are a slice of a combined deployment providing combat search and rescue capabilities to Africa Command with the group having deployed throughout the first week of June.

U.S. Africa Command, with partners, counters transnational threats and malign actors, strengthens security forces, and responds to crises in order to advance U.S. national interests and promote regional security, stability and prosperity.

Airmen of 210th RQS operate the HH-60G Pave Hawk combat search and rescue helicopter.

Deploying with the group of 176th Wing Airmen are combat rescue officers and enlisted pararescue Airmen of the 212th Rescue Squadron who are skilled parachutists, scuba divers and rock climbers responsible for rescuing isolated U.S. and allied military members.

Alaska Air National Guard Lt. Col. Jessica Pisano, 176th Maintenance Squadron commander, said Airmen preparation began late last year, and cargo preparation began in February.

Pisano said the maintenance group leaned forward to get deployment tasks completed ahead of time to ensure they were ready to deploy and to give Airmen extra time with their families in the weeks before departure.

"It's nice to be able to know that time before they go is theirs because all of their requirements are done," Pisano said. "They're not in scramble mode."

Ensuring 176th MXG Airmen hit all of their USAFRICOM requirements was unit deployment manager Master Sgt. Alison Cherry of the 176th MXG.

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Because rescue maintainers are counted on at home station to generate HH-60 sorties to support statewide civil search and rescue operations 24/7/365, Cherry said she worked closely with deploying Airmen to schedule their training so as not to interfere with their daily duties.

“For the most part, our maintainers are super thankful since they don’t have to worry because I can make their appointment, they are there at the right time, and they can focus on their job,” Cherry said.

Much of the training is distance-based while hands-on training includes combat skills like marksmanship and chemical-protection measures, all tailored to operations on the African continent.

“It’s really intensive,” Cherry said of the training effort. “There are requirements for everyone all the time and then, the minute you add a deployment, a different timeline is applied.”

Equally intensive was getting the Pave Hawks prepared to operate in Africa’s diverse climates ranging from sandy desert to jungle canopy.

Chief Master Sgt. Eric Chester, 176th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron superintendent, said the aircraft were hand selected partly on the fact they weren’t due for any major maintenance inspections or services, ensuring they would be fully available through the deployment.

He said transitioning from a civil to combat search and rescue footing required ensuring all of the combat systems were in top working order.

“We prepared the aircraft by going through every system to ensure they were up and running and fixing them before we go on the road,” Chester said.

Once maintainers were satisfied the Pave Hawks would pass the white-glove test, they checked defensive system operations, communications, navigation and all of the myriad systems necessary to make the HH-60 an effective combat search and rescue platform.

“After all of the operational checks are complete, we fold the aircraft, prepare it for shipment, and then we have a joint-inspection team inspect the aircraft,” Chester said.

The joint inspection process includes maintainers, C-17 loadmasters and logistics readiness Airmen who specialize in deployment operations. After passing inspection, the aircraft were sequestered to ensure they would stay ready to load.

From the outside, the operation could look like a flying, traveling circus since the HH-60s weren’t the only concern. Pisano said they had to prepare ground-support equipment, basic tools, helicopter-specific tools and “slow-moving vehicles” to support an overseas maintenance operation.

“That’s why we’re bringing such a big package because if we don’t bring it, we don’t have it,” she said.

After the aircraft and Airmen landed in Africa, the process was reversed. Chester said it takes several hours to “regenerate” an aircraft, transforming it like Optimus Prime from a folded, compact package to a flyaway helicopter. The rotor blades were placed back into action and the radio antennas were re-

installed along with dozens of other items that have to be put back in place.

With the helicopters in action, the culmination of months of hard work showed how deployed maintenance, logistics and operations Airmen were just the tip of the spear, Pisano said. During the deployment process, deploying Airmen needed health assessments, deployment orders, passports and finance paperwork to be mission-ready.

“The support agencies have been phenomenal throughout the deployment process,” she said.

Looming over the effort was the specter of COVID-19. With cancelled monthly drills and pandemic-mitigation protocols affecting the 176th MXG and supporting agencies, Pisano said their efforts to get out of the gate early ensured they weren’t caught out by the virus.

“If we hadn’t leaned forward the way we did, we would probably still be chasing our tails,” she said.

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Story link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.176wg.ang.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2223793/maintenance-airmen-critical-part-of-alaska-guard-africa-deployment/>



Alaska Air National Guardsmen assigned to the 176th Wing load a HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter onto a 144th Airlift Squadron C-17 Globemaster III in preparation for a deployment June 3, 2020. The helicopters belong to the ANG's 210th Rescue Squadron assigned to the Wing that will be deploying in the coming months. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)