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Air Force-owned C-17s reassigned to Alaska Air National Guard Active duty and Guard continue to share aircraft for unchanged mission

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Members of the 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard, and the 3rd Wing, U.S. Air Force, commemorated the change of assignment of eight C-17 Globe Master III aircraft based here during a ceremony on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, May 17.

“Today is a significant occasion,” said Col. Christopher Niemi, 3rd Wing commander. “It marks the transfer of the tails from the 3rd Wing to the 176th Wing, and it will be the first and only [active] association of the C-17s throughout the world.”

The eight JBER-based C-17s previously belonged to the Air Force’s 3rd Wing and were shared with the 176th Wing in what is known as a classic association, which began between the two units in 2007 when the 176th Wing stood up the 249th Airlift Squadron. A classic association of aircraft denotes that an active duty unit owns any given airframe, and the associate unit—either Air Force Reserves or Air National Guard—shares the duties associated with those airframes. The associate unit has aircrews, maintainers and support personnel assigned, which use the shared aircraft to execute their mission.

The reversal of the association, called an active association, denotes that the active duty component becomes the associate unit with the reserve component owning the airframes.

Though the “association flip” of the C-17s was the first of its kind, explained Niemi, it did not change the Total Force Concept embraced by the Air Force.

“The association between our units isn’t new,” explained Niemi. “We’re all doing the same mission out there. The reason we are here today, and this association exists, is to do that mission. Day to day, most of what this association is going to provide is the capacity to move stuff around the world with this airplane behind it, and to have crews that are ready in case we need to surge and meet our national security requirements. That’s our common shared goal, and if we keep this vision in mind and keep that at the forefront, I think we’ll be more successful as we move forward.”

The chief of staff of the Air Force made the decision to flip the association between units approximately two years ago, explained Col. Steven deMilliano, the 176th Wing commander. The Air Force recognized an excess of C-17s across its force structure, and decided that instead of divesting the C-17s here, the 3rd Wing would instead turn them over to the 176th Wing. This reversal of association then allowed the strategic airlift mission to continue in the state, with its strategic reach and unique capabilities throughout the Pacific and arctic regions.

“The capability that this unit brings really is pretty incredible,” said deMilliano. “When you think about everything that this combined association accomplishes compared to other C-17 units, everything from air land, air drop, formation air drop, contingency operations, long range search and rescue, arctic sustainment package delivery, support to NASA — there aren’t too many units that can claim that type of capability.”

Many of the capabilities unique to the Alaska-based C-17 units, explained deMilliano, were developed internally and in cooperation between the units.

“Those are capabilities that came from the bottom up,” he said, “and are things that you guys may not have been required to do, but you saw it was important for our nation and for our state and you made it happen,” he said in his remarks, directed at the Airmen who perform the mission. “I applaud that and I ask that you continue to try to innovate like that. It does take all of us to make that happen and I thank you for the contributions you’ve done to get to the stage where we are today.”

Both commanders agreed that, despite the association switch being the reason for the ceremony, the real story is of the cooperation between active and reserve components, and emphasized the Total Force Concept as a roadmap to a success by recognizing both unit’s mission is one and the same.

“When one of these aircraft land anywhere around the world in global operations,” asked deMilliano, “what’s the first thing people see? When you look at it, it says United States Air Force on the side. It doesn’t say active component. It doesn’t say reserve component. It says United States Air Force. That’s who we are collectively. This is not the finish line, if anything, it’s the starting line.”

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Photos can be found at the following link: