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Alaska Air Guard trains to support NASA human spaceflight program

KAPOLEI, Hawaii — Alaska Air National Guard personnel completed four weeks of training during Exercise H20 in Hawaii, Feb. 6, honing their long-range search and rescue capability for the NASA human spaceflight program they are responsible for supporting.

The Air Guard's 176th Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, is the only wing in the U.S. Air Force, Guard and Reserve, with C-17 Globemaster III aircraft and pararescue personnel that combine to provide long-range search and rescue—able to travel the furthest distance in the shortest time, in response to a life-threatening scenario.

"NASA needed support for commercial spaceflight, for SpaceX and Boeing sending their commercial capsules up," said Maj. Joseph Leman, exercise director and a C-17 instructor pilot with the 144th Airlift Squadron at the 176th Wing. "They wanted assistance in the event of a non-nominal landing occurrence with the launch or return, for recovery of their astronauts."

Leman explained that rapidly deployable global personnel recovery is a requirement for the space program, and that there are multiple levels of response capabilities in place to ensure recovery as quickly as possible, depending on the location of personnel requiring assistance.

"If astronauts splash down within 200 miles of the launch site, a rescue triad is on alert to respond," said Leman. "If the landing is beyond that radius, a C-17 becomes the aircraft of choice for the mission because we can go further and get there faster."

According to NASA, when astronauts splash down into the ocean, recovery teams must be able to transport them to land quickly. In the event of a variety of contingency landings, pararescue forces, pre-positioned in key locations, are prepared to rescue the crew anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. Within 200 nautical miles of the launch site, an HC-130 Combat King II aircraft, two HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters, and pararescue personnel will deploy from Patrick Air Force Base in Florida with rescue equipment and medical supplies.

If this scenario were to occur more than 200 nautical miles from the launch site, a C-17 deploys with and airdrops multiple watercraft and pararescue personnel, who extract the astronauts from their capsule, treats and sustains them for up to 72 hours.

JBER's Air Guard wing is home to a well-known rescue triad, comprised of the 210th, 211th and 212th rescue squadrons, which provide HH-60s, HC-130s, and Guardian Angel teams, respectively. Their primary mission is to conduct personnel recovery in military operations. They are on alert in Alaska

24/7/365 for immediate response in the unlikely event of a downed military aircraft, and they also provide civil search and rescue upon request by civil authorities under extenuating circumstances. Guardian Angel is a non-aircraft, equipment-based, human weapon system comprised of combat rescue officers (CRO), pararescuemen (PJ), survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) specialists, and uniquely trained support personnel dedicated to personnel recovery.

About 10 years ago, a C-17 pilot and combat rescue officer at the 176th Wing considered the possibility of combining the wing's rescue capability with their C-17s' rapid strategic delivery and tactical airdrop capability in order to provide an enhanced search and rescue option.

"Then-Majors Radford and Komatsu were the pioneers of this platform," said Lt. Col. John Romspert, commander of the 212th Rescue Squadron. "They saw what we could do with rescue and the C-17s and said, 'why can't we perform rescue with the C-17?' It just made sense."

Col. Kenneth Radford, vice commander of the 176th Wing and C-17 pilot, and Col. Matthew Komatsu, 176th Mission Support Group commander and combat rescue officer, saw a possibility ten years ago that became a reality. Due to the hard work and dedication of a team of professionals with a mutual goal to innovate, and the desire to achieve a shared vision, the 176th Wing is one of kind.

"The 176th Operations Group commander at the time, a C-17 pilot named Lt. Col. Blake Gettys (now retired brigadier general), believed in the idea," said Komatsu. "So, with the support of our chain of command, we put our best C-17 and Guardian Angel tacticians on the problem while Ken and I pushed our respective communities," he said. "They crushed it."

Initially, it was thought that the new capability could help deliver what would later be called the Arctic Sustainment Package, a modular unit developed independently by the Alaska Air National Guard that may be customized to provide food and shelter in a potential mass-casualty, cold-weather emergency until personnel could be rescued.

The 144th Airlift Squadron (then-249th AS) and 212th Rescue Squadron personnel wrote the tactics, techniques and procedures, the checklists, created requirements for certifications, and conducted their first combined training exercise during Lava Rescue 2014 in Hawaii. It was the first time Guardian Angels and a rescue boat were airdropped from a C-17. The units performed day and night equipment and personnel water drops, with pararescue personnel and boats parachuting from a C-17 into the Pacific Ocean miles off the coast of Hawaii.

"Vigilant Ace 2016 was our first demonstration of long-range SAR with a takeoff from JBER, aerial refueling with the 168th Air Refueling Squadron over the Aleutian Islands, then dropping the GA team off the coast of Japan and landing in Japan 11-plus hours later," said Lt. Col. Jeffrey Banker, deputy commander of the 176th Operations Group. "Weeks later, we were approached by NASA representatives at an ARC WEPTAC (Air Reserve Component Weapons and Tactics Council) to see if we would be interested in applying long-range SAR to the human spaceflight support rescue requirement."

The 176th Wing worked with National Guard Bureau and Air Mobility Command for approvals and requirements over a period of several years to become mission qualified, and performed their first alert mission at Joint Base Charleston, S.C. for the NASA SpaceX Demo-2 space launch, May 30, 2020. The SpaceX Crew Dragon Spacecraft, Endeavor, carried astronauts Douglas Hurly and Robert Behnken to the International Space Station. It was the first crewed orbital spaceflight launch from the United States since the shuttle mission ended in 2011. 144th Airlift Squadron crews sat alert for the historic launch, and for the return on August 2, after 64 days in orbit. Hurly and Behnken splashed down in the Gulf of

Mexico off the coast of Pensacola, Fla., the first human landing in a commercially built and operated spacecraft.

“We were on alert with pararescuemen for the launch and landing,” said Banker, C-17 mission commander for both events at Joint Base Charleston, S.C. “Although it’s unlikely that we will be needed to respond, it’s important that we are trained and ready to do so if necessary.”

Exercise H2O is accomplished annually to ensure that C-17 aircrews and pararescue personnel are proficient with their capabilities while working together, which is not part of their regular mission requirements.

“Our primary goal for this training exercise was reinforcing and refining our rescue airdrop TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures) in support of human spaceflight,” said Sr. Master Sgt. Jeffrey Hamilton, 212th lead planner for Exercise H2O and pararescueman. “We got all of our training lines that were geared toward that accomplished except for one, due to weather, so it was a great success.”

The Hawaii Air National Guard’s 204th Airlift Squadron began training for C-17 long-range SAR as well, and are the only other unit that provides a C-17 pararescue capability, working with other units’ pararescue personnel, including the 212th RQS, to support NASA’s human spaceflight program. They sit alert in Hawaii.

“We’re able to train with the 204th C-17s while we’re here as well, and since they and the 144th both perform this mission, it’s great to be able to collaborate and ensure consistencies with both of them,” said Hamilton. “They can be assigned PJs from any active, Guard or Reserve unit, so the training is really important to be able to maintain proficiency.”

Sixteen combat rescue officers and pararescuemen received extensive training while in Hawaii, significantly more that they are able to accomplish while at home station.

Hamilton explained that the Hawaii training is important, effective and efficient. It allows for more consolidated, repetitive training than the team is able to get in Alaska. The drop zones are closer, the weather is more accommodating, and the environment allows for day and night operations. In Alaska, it doesn’t get dark in the summer, so night operations have to take place during colder months.

“The last time that I did a jump into the water in Alaska, we were banging our helmets when we got back, breaking the ice off,” Hamilton said. “We’ll call that a night,” he laughed.

Exercising in Hawaii allows them to accomplish repetitive operations for many personnel, ensuring a large variety of required training objectives are met in a relatively short period of time.

“It’s important to make the external factors as negligible as you can when you’re doing reps for training,” said Hamilton. “This is a really good environment, with the facilities and direct access to the drop zones and airfield, boat in the nearby harbor, ability to wash and hang the chutes, it just makes it a real easy place to get it all done.”

During Exercise H2O, the 212th RQS accomplished more than ten training requirements for 16 personnel. Eight rescue jumpmasters received recurrency for day and night operations, a pararescue instructor received an upgrade, and a rescue jumpmaster and dive supervisor each received certification. Sixteen pararescue personnel conducted three types of day and night parachute jumps and received currency or recurrency, and personnel accomplished annual diving requirements. Seven drops

with two different types of inflatable watercraft airdrop packages were deployed from the C-17 and HC-130 in conjunction with personnel water drops. The team also had operational interaction with Special Operations Command Pacific riggers and jumpers, Navy SEALs, and the Pacific Air Forces functional area manager.

“We came out here with the 144th, to give them training on the packages that they will use to support human spaceflight, to conduct precision jumpmaster training, and to continually refine our TTPs for long-range SAR within the 176th Wing,” said Romspert.

Exercise H2O not only helps participating personnel train for the human spaceflight program, but long-range SAR supports delivery of the Arctic Sustainment Package, which may be deployed by an Alaska Air Guard C-17 or HC-130 in the Arctic, Antarctic or other extreme cold-weather regions.

“What’s really important here is the diversity of the 176th Ops Group,” said Romspert. “We’re utilizing all the tools we have to accomplish the mission most effectively.

“This training, this trip, shows how effective our operators and senior leaders are to ensure we accomplish the mission,” said Romspert. “And it’s important to consider what we can be doing, how we’re going to innovate. ‘Innovate or die,’ right?”

Alaska and Hawaii Air National Guard C-17s are being used as a rescue platform, the only ones in the Air Force. They are proficient with rescue equipment and personnel day and night water drops, they are supporting the NASA spaceflight program, and Alaska is able to deliver life-saving packages in extreme cold weather. These capabilities are the direct result of innovation, vision and partnerships.

So innovative, in fact, that the 176th Wing’s combined Guardian Angel and C-17 long-range search and rescue concept was a finalist for the 2017 Robert J. Collier Trophy, awarded annually “for the greatest achievement in aeronautics or astronautics in America, with respect to improving the performance, efficiency, and safety of air or space vehicles,” according to its website.

During Exercise H2O, aircrews with the 144th Airlift Squadron completed airdrop specific training, swapping out pilots for each pass while airborne to allow more of them the opportunity to meet requirements. They certified two pilots and two loadmasters in rescue airdrop, and certified four pilots and two loadmasters on dropping illumination flares.

“We practiced one of the major pieces of water rescue with dropping the inflated boat,” said Lt. Col. Nathan Schauer mann, commander of the 144th Airlift Squadron. “We also used night vision goggles during the night ops, our loadmasters dropped illumination flares and markers, we flew a three-ship formation flight, aerial refueled with a KC-135, got quite a bit of currency, but more than that, proficiency,” he said.

HC-130s with the Alaska Air National Guard’s 211th RQS conducted day and night equipment and personnel water drops, and they received recurrency training for high altitude air drops with the pararescue personnel jumping at 17,000 feet of altitude. The HC-130s also conducted day and night aerial refueling with MV-22B Osprey from the Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 363.

“We look for opportunities to work with different agencies, with different types of aircraft that we can’t refuel at home station,” said Maj. Wes Ladd, HC-130 aircraft commander for the exercise. “It makes you more well-rounded, a better aviator when you go outside of your comfort zone with new and challenging opportunities,” he said.

Interservice operations are mutually beneficial. The Marines aircrews were able to get four check-rides accomplished the night they refueled with the 211th RQS.

Hundreds of hours of training during Exercise H2O ensured currency, proficiency and certifications for personnel in three operational squadrons, but the exercises are not possible without maintenance, logistics and support personnel.

“Maintenance and logistics personnel did an incredible job ensuring generation of aircraft, equipment and cargo, which is paramount for a successful exercise,” said Leman. “I appreciate all of our support personnel for their hard work and dedication to ensure we were able to meet training objectives.”

From planning, coordination and scheduling, to maintaining aircraft, cleaning and packing parachutes, and ensuring boat operations are prepared for water airdrops, the training took a large group of people with a variety of professional capabilities to ensure a successful exercise.

“You have so many different walks of life, C-17s, HC-130J, GAs and all the personnel, and we’re finding a way to meld our mission, operate together and be better at what we do,” said Romspert. “I think this training, the cohesiveness, and the interoperability of the 176th Ops Group to innovate and push boundaries, just makes us better for the state of Alaska and for America.”

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (May not be accessible from all military computers.)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157718230491792/with/50926912786/>
3. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/388648/alaska-air-guard-trains-support-nasa-human-spaceflight-program-and-mission-readiness>



Alaska Air National Guard personnel completed four weeks of training during Exercise H2O in Hawaii, January and February, 2021, honing their long-range search and rescue capability for the NASA human spaceflight program they are responsible for supporting. Members of the 144th Airlift Squadron, 210th and 211th Rescue Squadrons, 176th Wing maintenance, logistics and support personnel, accomplished certifications, currency and proficiency for mission requirements. They performed day and night equipment and personnel water drops, with boats and pararescue personnel parachuting into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Hawaii, and onto land at Barking Sands, Kauai and Dillingham Airfield, Oahu. Guardian Angel personnel are approved for alternate clothing and personal protective equipment options in place of uniform wear. Some exercise support staff were approved for alternate clothing due to unique conditions and work requirements. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead)

