

## WEAPONS CARRIERS

Most Air National Guard units get a year to prepare for deployments. The Vermont ANG's "Green Mountain Boys" got about a month.

Normally, "you know well in advance, upwards of even years, ... especially in the [US Central Command area of responsibility] for combat rotations," said Col. David C. Lyons, commander of the 407th Air Expeditionary Group at an undisclosed Middle Eastern location.

Getting around a month's notice "is pretty astounding," he said.

The unit rose to the challenge, mobilizing about 300 airmen for the deployment that began in December, to help fill a carrier gap in the region.

Lyons' command includes several coalition partners and a unit of US marines; before the Vermont unit arrived, there were no USAF air assets on the ramp at his location in Southwest Asia.

But, he told *Air Force Magazine*, his team of airmen at the base did a fantastic job of speeding up preparations for airmen from the 158th Fighter Wing out of Burlington Arpt., Vt.

"We're focused on customer service here," Lyons said.

Maj. Jack Green, commander of the 407th Expeditionary Operations Support Squadron, led the beddown preparations.

In an Air Force news release, Green said that from the time they received word of the deployment, "our hair was on fire getting everything prepped."

He continued, "We identified the day that the [operation] was going to kick off and we built our timeline back from that."

The base had not been used for USAF combat operations for several years, and some of the space had been recapitalized or reassigned in the absence of a USAF mission, Lyons said. "One of the most difficult things we had to overcome is taking a little bit of that space back, or really just going out and surveying the land and figuring out what would work best, where."

The next biggest challenge, Lyons said, was quickly getting the base prepared to generate combat operations—namely, getting weapons assembled.

"When the parts and pieces that make up weapons arrive on the base, they're not ready to just slap onto an airplane. The bombs, specifically, have to be put together," he said.

The airmen already at the base identified what they believed the Vermont Guardsmen would need for their expected missions, then determined when they needed the ammunition troops to arrive, Lyons explained.

Because of those preparations, and the professionalism of all the airmen, he said, "we were able to generate combat sorties two days ahead of schedule—and within 15 hours of jet arrival."



An F-16 assigned to the Vermont ANG's 134th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron readies to roll out for a takeoff in Southwest Asia. Combat missions flown by the squadron have degraded the capabilities of ISIS.

That speed to the fight garnered praise from Lt. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigian, commander of the combined force air component.

The Vermont ANG "did a phenomenal job in generating combat sorties to put the hurt" on ISIS, he told *Air Force Magazine*.

The extra airpower was helpful because there was no US aircraft carrier in the region at the time.

*Eisenhower* launched hundreds of air strikes for Operation Inherent Resolve during its seven months at sea, then returned to Norfolk, Va., in late December. It was scheduled to be replaced by the aircraft carrier *George H. W. Bush*, but maintenance delays and additional repair requirements left a carrier gap in the Middle East.

*Bush* left Norfolk in late January.

Harrigian said the Combined Air Operations Center is "continuously evaluating airpower requirements and making adjustments as necessary" to ensure there is the "right amount of combat airpower overhead for those guys on the ground."

In this case, Harrigian said, "coalition partners ... made additional sorties available," and the Vermont F-16 squadron, the 134th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, deployed to the region in December.

Between Dec. 10, 2016, and Feb. 1 the Vermont airmen flew 498 sorties and delivered 766 weapons, including missions for operations in Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa, Syria, averaging more than 100 weapons drops per week during the first seven weeks of deployment.

"They're flying 24-hour ops, seven days a week," Lyons said. The missions include close air support and deliberate and dynamic targeting.

"We're pretty proud of the efforts that Vermont has given to those specific fights, although, anywhere that you find Da'esh on the map, our folks have the opportunity and are potentially going to be tasked, anywhere in Iraq and Syria, to seek and to wipe [them] off the face of the earth," Lyons said. ★

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