

US European Command News Release

Air Force unit stands down in Iceland

Release Date: Jul 05, 2006

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KEFLAVIK, Iceland – The 85th Air Force Group, a tenant unit at Naval Air Station, Keflavik, marked 55 years of heritage and cooperation during an inactivation ceremony here June 29.

“From fighters to helicopters, AWACS to tankers, NAS Keflavik has seen almost every aircraft in the U.S. Air Force inventory transition through here over the years,” said Brig. Gen. Robert Steel, 48th Fighter Wing commander.

During the ceremony, Col. Phillip Gibbons, 85th Group commander, relinquished command and encased the group colors.

The 85th Group, which was aligned under the 48th Fighter Wing, consisted of seven squadrons and more than 1,300 people. The group was responsible for day-to-day flight operations of HH-60 helicopters, KC-130 tankers and F-15 fighter jets.

The U.S. military presence in the country began in 1941 at the request of the Government of Iceland fearing an invasion by Germany. At the end of the war U.S. forces withdrew.

In 1949, Iceland became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and U.S. forces returned.

The Air Force group survived growing pains such as designation and airframe changes, including the transition from the Army Air Corps to the U.S. Navy assumption of control and more.

Another success came on December 7, 2001 when the 56th Rescue Squadron was credited with completing their 70th life-saving mission during their 14 months in Iceland. Members of the squadron responded to a distress call from an Icelandic fishing vessel that lost power in gale force winds and heavy seas.

Pararescueman Staff Sgt. Jay Lane was presented with the Gold Medal of Valor of the Republic of Iceland for his actions during the rescue, making him the first receipt of the gold level of the award.

From 1971 to April 2003 the RQS made 308 saves during rescue operations.

The group’s rescue operations were not just confined to Iceland. Three helicopters and more than 60 personnel deployed to Sierra Leone, Africa in July 2003 in support of Joint Task Force Liberia. The RQS once again saved lives by extracting personnel from the U.S. Embassy there and providing a peacekeeping presence over the city of Monrovia during civil unrest.

Wednesday’s inactivation ceremony commemorated the rich history of the group and positive relationship with the host nation and the U.S. Air Force.

