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Recapitalizing for the long war



New generation fueling the fight with venerable KC-135

340th EARS keeps air

by Capt. Wes Ticer
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Despite the age of the KC-135 – the Air Force’s top recapitalization priority – the 340th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron Stratotanker’s role in delivering air power has proven itself critical to the wing mission and to U.S. Central Command.

As enablers, the refuelers make every other air mission possible by delivering combat airpower anywhere, anytime, according to Lt. Col. Tom Riney, 340th EARS commander.

“For the past 50 years the KC-135s have made immediate, on call, close air support possible and enabled complete domination of the sky,” Colonel Riney said. “In the current conflict, the troops on the ground deserve and expect air cover when and where they need it, and our strike pilots deserve and expect to enter the fray with the edge that a full tank of gas provides.”

The squadron accomplishes its mission with a very diverse mix of people. Currently there are crews from all five active duty CONUS KC-135 bases, both OCONUS bases, and six Air National Guard bases. Over the past few years every active duty KC-135 unit and most KC-135 Guard and Reserve units have provided aircrews to fly and fight with the Pythons of the 340th EARS.

Driving the need for mixing crews from multiple locations and commands is the size of the operation here and the number of hours the crews have to fly.

“We are a very young active duty crew force, and our Guard and Reserve crews round out our total force team by providing the experience and expertise that only years of flying can bring,” Colonel Riney said. “I am very proud of how these professional aviators step up and make the mission happen 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

Looking at the successes of the KC-135,

some might not realize the work that is being done with an airframe that entered service 50 years ago. Colonel Riney said it’s not easy keeping the planes in top shape, but the people who maintain them make it look that way.

“While we love our KC-135s and treat them as best we can, it is our maintenance experts who keep these planes flying,” he said. “When you consider the age of our fleet, the amount of hours we are flying, and the environmental changes these planes endure by coming from northern tier bases to the desert, the accomplishments of our maintenance team are truly mind boggling.

The commander said he left his base when the temperature was minus 17 degrees. Three days later, his maintenance crews had that same plane up and flying an operational mission in the desert.

“It is through sheer will and determination that our maintainers keep these jets in the air,” Colonel Riney said. “The amazing mission capable rates and record-high mission effectiveness rates that we in the cockpit enjoy are truly a testament to these professional maintainers.”

Another aspect of the tanker mission here is the number of different aircraft on the receiving end of the tanker’s fuel. Crews might spend one day refueling Navy F-18s or Royal Air Force GR-4s, and the next day offload fuel to RC-135s, E-8 Joint STARS, or Air Force fighters on their way to protect troops on the ground.

“From the cockpit the changing airframes keeps us on our toes, but from the back of the aircraft our boom operators have to be on their ‘A’ game every mission,” Colonel Riney said. “Switching from refueling a fighter to a heavy, then back to a fighter,

presents serious challenges and our boom operators are very effective at making the transitions. Our boom operators truly earn their stripes and uphold the legacy that the young Tigers established decades ago in the skies over Vietnam.”

As a total force team in the air and on the ground, the KC-135 community is proud of its contribution to the long war, Colonel Riney said. From enabling persistent air cover and ISR for the troops on the ground and air mobility that keeps convoys off the road, the tanker gas is a key link in the chain of events leading to mission success.



British Royal Air Force photo

A KC-135 Stratotanker from the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing refuels a British Royal Air Force Tornado GR-4.

craft in the fight 24-7



Photo by Senior Airman Erik Hofmeyer

Airman 1st Class John Reschke, 340th Air Refueling Squadron boom operator, calculates the weight and balance of the KC-135 Stratotanker before takeoff.



Photo by Airman 1st Class Gustavo Gonzalez

Senior Airman Neal Sicard, 340th Aircraft Maintenance Unit crew chief, preps for maintenance work on the KC-135 Stratotanker fuel cell by draining the main fuel tank sumps.



Photo by Senior Airman Erik Hofmeyer

On the cover: (left to right) 1st Lt. Dan Mecham, 340th Air Refueling Squadron pilot, Airman 1st Class Alan Champagne, 340th ARS boom operator, and Staff Sgt. Tavia Weaver, 340th Aircraft Maintenance Unit electrical environmental specialist, all play integral roles in making every air mission possible by providing the lifeblood of operations, and replacing the KC-135 is the Air Force's top recapitalization priority.