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Wing earns 17th Outstanding Unit Award

By Lt. Col. Dale Greer
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

The Kentucky Air National Guard's 123rd Airlift Wing has earned its 17th Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, maintaining a nearly unsurpassed record as one of the most decorated organizations in Air Force history.

The award, which is bestowed to the top 10 percent of units across the Air Force, recognizes the wing for excellence in mission accomplishment, community engagement, participation in deployments and exercises, and unit readiness.

Only a handful of organizations have matched the 123rd's continued record of excellence with 17 AFOUAs, said Brig. Gen. Warren Hurst, Kentucky's assistant adjutant general for Air, who presented the latest award to Col. Jeffrey Wilkinson, wing commander, during a ceremony here Sept. 16.

Wilkinson, speaking to nearly 1,000 Airmen who gathered in the Fuel Cell Hangar for the ceremony, praised the wing for continually setting the standard against which others are measured.

"In addition to the Air Force core values of Integrity First, Service Before Self and Excellence In All We Do, all of you across the 123rd Airlift Wing exude the complementary values of commitment, persistence and faithfulness," he said.

"I wholeheartedly believe this is what makes us stand ahead of all other Air Force wings and why you have earned the deserved recognition as the most outstanding and decorated mobility wing across the entire U.S. Air Force."

The wing's latest award recognizes accomplishments from Oct. 1, 2013 to Sept. 30, 2015. During that time, the Louisville-based unit deployed 588 Airmen to 19 locations in 13 countries — many in harm's way — for a total of 21,523 Title 10 days.

Among those deployments, the wing mobilized more than 90 Airmen and two C-130 Hercules aircraft to Qatar in support of operations Inherent Resolve and Freedom's Sentinel, flying 466 missions and 625 combat sorties to airlift nearly 4,000 troops and 355 tons of cargo.



Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton/KyANG

Col. Jeff Wilkinson (right), commander of the 123rd Airlift Wing, pins a steamer to the unit colors during a ceremony here Sept. 16. The steamer signifies the unit's selection for its 17th Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, continuing the wing's legacy as one of the most decorated organizations in U.S. Air Force History.

The wing's 123rd Contingency Response Group and 123rd Special Tactics Squadron were heavily engaged as well. Special Operators were deployed for more than 3,700 days in support of taskings that spanned four theaters, conducting over 50 combat search-and-rescue sorties and more than 470 combat missions controlling 800 aircraft and resulting in more than 700 enemy killed in action.

In West Africa, the 123rd CRG rapidly deployed 84 Airmen and equipment to Dakar Senegal for Operation United Assistance, the international effort to fight the largest outbreak of Ebola virus in history. As the first Air Force unit on the ground, the group quickly established an air base and cargo processing facility from scratch, supporting the arrival of 193 aircraft and the delivery of 1,198 short tons of cargo and medical supplies, including blood and plasma.

The wing also participated in numerous joint and international training exercises

in Alaska and Europe, including the 70th-anniversary reenactment of Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands, Operation Sabre Junction in Germany, Operation Noble Ledger in Norway and Operation Atlantic Resolve in Poland.

Back home, the wing continued to set high standards for community engagement, hosting the U.S. Navy Blue Angels and facilitating two Thunder Over Louisville air shows with attendance in excess of 1.3 million people.

The unit also supported its key international partners through military exchange programs with the Colombian and Djiboutian militaries; supported multiple distinguished visitors, including the president and vice president; and further enhanced its public affairs engagement, with eight national awards of excellence in news, feature and photo coverage, and top-ranked social media platforms reaching more than 1 million people.

GMS named the top CR unit in Air Force

By Master Sgt. Phil Spech
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

The Kentucky Air National Guard's 123rd Global Mobility Squadron has been named Air Mobility Command's Contingency Response Unit of the Year for 2017.

The Guard squadron was chosen over multiple active-duty and Reserve contingency response units, said Lt. Col. Steve Campbell, commander of the 123rd GMS, which is part of the larger 123rd Contingency Response Group here.

During 2017, the unit was tasked to operate Qayyarah West Airfield, Iraq, serving as the most forward-deployed U.S. Air Force unit during the West Mosul offensive, moving 674 short tons of cargo and 2,000 personnel closer to the fight with ISIS.

"This mission was very important to us, because after many exercises, Ebola relief support and humanitarian missions, it was the first time our CRG operated in a combat zone," Campbell said.

While in Iraq, the unit de-conflicted 4,500 air operations across 2,800 square miles of combat airspace, he added.

The unit also provided humanitarian relief following Hurricane Harvey, establishing a Disaster Aeromedical Staging Facility in Houston; and was instrumental in response to Hurricane Maria in San Juan, Puerto Rico, evacuating 3,887 passengers, moving 3,617 short tons of cargo and providing ramp operations to 268 aircraft.

"We went to Puerto Rico for six weeks following Hurricane Maria, opened San Juan International Airport and started receiving Guard, active-duty, international and commercial aircraft facilitating the forward deployment of humanitarian supplies," Campbell said.

"We also supported the president, vice-president and multiple distinguished visitors while simultaneously conducting relief operations."

Campbell said the unit maintained a high operations tempo and supported double the number of aircraft typical for contingency operations.

Unit members also supported several other operations in 2017, including U.S. Air Forces in Europe missions moving more than 240 troops



Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton/KyANG

The 123rd Global Mobility Squadron is the Air Mobility Command Contingency Response Unit of the Year for 2017. Shown with the award are Lt. Col. Steve Campbell (left), 123rd GMS commander, Col. Bruce Bancroft (center), commander of the 123rd Contingency Response Group, and Lt. Col. Ryan Adams (right), commander of the 123rd Global Mobility Readiness Squadron.

and 95 tons of cargo.

"We routinely send aerial porters and maintenance personnel to augment deployed active-duty units in Europe," Campbell explained. We send out teams two to three at a time to get good experience supporting U.S. Transportation Command."

In addition to the real-world operations the unit supported last year, its Airmen also participated in multiple domestic exercises including Vigilant Guard and Mobility Guardian to keep troops trained and prepared for rapid response.

The squadron and its parent group are often described as an "airbase in a box." Their mission is to assess, establish and operate contingency airfields in response to combat operations, natural disasters, terrorist attacks or humanitarian emergencies.

"Last year put us on the map, from completing a combat mission, rolling right into sitting alert for three hurricanes — Harvey, Irma and Maria

— and responding to two — Harvey and Maria," Campbell said. "We had many traditional Guardsmen performing up to 220 days of active duty, which is unheard of. The accolades really speak for themselves. It really was a remarkable year for us."

"The 123rd CRG has achieved a number of accomplishments in the last two years," added Col. Bruce Bancroft, commander of the 123rd Contingency Response Group. "It is a true testament to the incredible caliber of Airmen we have in this unit."

"Many of our troops have been serving in the CRG for over 10 years," he continued. "This long-term continuity and high level of experience is simply unmatched across the contingency response enterprise. The volunteerism and dedication to mission is unlike anything I've seen in 23 years of service, and I couldn't be prouder."

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We welcome your feedback. Please contact the Public Affairs Office directly if you have suggestions for articles or photography. Our office is located in Room 1160 of the Wing Headquarters Building, 1101 Grade Lane, Louisville, KY 40213.

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