

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Air Guard unit finds heartfelt service in flight to the North Pole

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Reaching into his desk drawer, Lt. Col. Carson A. Hardesty, safety officer of the Milwaukee-based 128th Air Refueling Wing (ARW), placed a neat, laminated and unwrinkled image on his desk. A photo of a toddler with a big smile on her face as she steered the wheel of a KC-135 jet, and a young Capt. Hardesty with a beaming grin as he held the young girl in his lap, evoked a moment of silence as Hardesty reflected on the impact of serving children who are battling cancer and terminal illnesses. “It’s seeing the face of those kids,” said Hardesty, pointing to the photo as he struggled to hold back tears. “This is what we do it for.” This year, the 128th ARW participated in Flight to the North Pole (FTTNP), an event dedicated to providing a special holiday experience for families with children who are fighting illnesses, at Signature Flight Support MKE, General Mitchell International Airport, Milwaukee, Dec. 10. “The ‘Flight to the North Pole’ is an annual event for families that have a child or children currently fighting childhood cancer,” said Roberta Coker, officer of the FTTNP Milwaukee organization. “This journey to the ‘North Pole’ is to help these families forget about being in the hospital, being sick and to concentrate on having fun — if for only one day. The mission is to provide families a happy memory, relaxing time together and remove them from the day-to-day concerns they are dealing with.”

To give the children a festive and unforgettable experience, the 128th ARW adorned the interior of KC-135 jets with holiday decorations before picking the families up from Delta Air Lines terminal and transiting them over to the “North Pole,” located at the Signature Flight Support MKE air terminal. While on the journey to the “North Pole,” children and their families received the opportunity to explore the KC-135 jets and interact with 128th ARW personnel. “The children love seeing military

members in uniform,” said Coker, a former member of the 128th ARW. “Having this great opportunity to go on a military aircraft, not every child or family have that opportunity. We are happy that the 128th ARW is helping us make these kids’ dreams come true to see Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus.”

When the KC-135 jets arrived at the “North Pole,” families exited the aircraft and were met by iconic holiday figures such as Santa, Mrs. Claus, Elsa from the Disney animated feature “Frozen,” and more. After the jovial meet and greet, the children and their families were escorted into the Signature hangar where they participated in holiday fun and festivities to end their journey to the North Pole. “I am honored to be a part of an event like this,” said Master Sgt. Karley Holtz, boom operator from the 126th Air Refueling Squadron at the 128th ARW, and flight crewmember for FTTNP. “The impact is huge! It is an amazing opportunity to be able to provide our airplane for the children.” After the visit, as the holiday lights in the aircraft were shut off and the doors began to close, service members reflected on the fighting spirit of each child and their families. At the end, what illuminated the dark and dim body of the KC-135 jet was the light that emanated from the children and their families as they continue to battle and persevere through the hardships of terminal illness.

“The unit really comes together,” Hardesty said. “Giving back for the children, that’s the majority of it. We’re here, the county, Signature — we help each other out to make sure that this really happens.” For the 128th ARW, Flight to the North Pole is a time-honored tradition with an everlasting impact that exemplifies what it means to come together to give and serve. To learn more or support Flight to the North Pole MKE, visit <https://flighttothenorthpolemke.org/>