

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard recalls proud service of RC-26 aircraft

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Three decades of service to the Wisconsin Air National Guard came to a quiet end last month for the RC-26 Metroliner aircraft.

In a way, that may be fitting, as the RC-26 served best as a quiet observer for domestic operations — particularly the National Guard Counterdrug program. The RC-26 began with an operational support airlift mission, but since 1996 the aircraft had supported both state and federal narcotics, counter-insurgency and homeland security missions.

Col. Paul Felician, director of the Wisconsin National Guard Counterdrug Program, said the aircraft saved countless lives in numerous ways. One way was preventing dangerous narcotics from reaching the streets for consumption.

“By removing these narcotics from circulation, you are saving people from suffering the effects of those narcotics,” Felician explained.

The RC-26 also reduced risk to law enforcement and the public by eliminating the need for high-speed pursuit.

“A few months ago, our RC-26 was supporting a task force mission and the suspected narcotics dealer began to flee law enforcement on Madison’s beltline at speeds exceeding 100 miles per hour,” Felician said. “High-speed chases are a leading cause of death for law enforcement and they are also a risk to the public. What the aircraft does is assist law enforcement in acquiring fleeing vehicles through observation support, alleviating the need for law enforcement to engage in

high-speed pursuit. The suspect slows down, and once he reaches his destination that location is relayed to law enforcement.”

Lt. Col. Benjamin West, program manager for Wisconsin’s RC-26 aircraft, said the RC-26 embodied what National Guard service looks like — “doing missions unique to the domestic responsibility role, while simultaneously supporting the [federal] mission overseas.”

Being outside law enforcement, yet directly supporting a counterdrug mission, has allowed the Wisconsin National Guard to assist and serve a wide variety of agencies that might not otherwise have access to critical assets such as the RC-26, West said.

The involvement of other nations in the Mexican drug cartels’ production of fentanyl and distribution into the United States, as well as laundering those drug profits, directly ties into the National Guard’s ability to support National Defense Strategy item number one, West said — defending the homeland.

Wisconsin’s RC-26 was one of 11 such aircraft operating across the country. Other locations included Jacksonville, Florida; Montgomery, Alabama; Meridian, Mississippi; Houston; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; Fresno, California; Spokane, Washington; Clarksburg, West Virginia; and Syracuse, New York. In 2013 the RC-26 mission in Jacksonville ended, and the Syracuse RC-26 was relocated to Des Moines, Iowa.

The RC-26’s ability to provide observation support made the aircraft a valuable asset beyond the counterdrug mission.

“It was a primary player in disaster response” for Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Ike, West said. “It performed Secret Service support for Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee conventions as well as presidential ground movements, flooding in various cities along the Mississippi River, post-tornado damage assessment in Oklahoma City, power plant assessments after the 9/11 terror attacks, forest fire detections and missing person searches — just to name a few.”

Felician agreed that the RC-26 has many highlights with the Wisconsin National Guard.

“It was sent to the border, it has flown in just about every state in the continental U.S. in search of narcotics operations, it has helped suppress wildfires and assisted in search and rescue missions,” Felician said. “It was incredibly valuable for search and rescue missions, wildfires, flooding — its observation capabilities were critical. It can tell you where a wildfire is hottest and where it is moving, which helps with mitigation and interdiction.”

The RC-26 was also deployed to Michigan’s upper peninsula to help search for Maj. Durwood Nelson’s downed F-16 in December 2020.

The RC-26 deployed overseas to conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well. In 2007 two of the aircraft went to Hurlbut Air Force Base in Florida to serve as overseas training aircraft, and four RC-26s went to Balad Air Base in Iraq, and later to Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, for six years.

“Over 50,000 flying hours were put on those six aircraft with a perfect safety record,” West said. “In theater the RC-26B supported all manner of operations with special emphasis on special forces support. Much of that mission remains classified still.”

West reconnected with a Delta Force operator — now a Drug Enforcement Agency agent — on a recent counterdrug mission on the West Coast.

“Over the day we realized that we were frequently on the same missions with me in the air and him on the ground in the assaulting force,” West recalled. “He remembered our classified call sign even 12 years removed — a fun small world story.”

West said efforts to move away from the RC-26 began in 2013 when the aircraft returned from overseas. Former U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, an RC-26 pilot with the Wisconsin Air National Guard, spent 10 years working with the National Guard Bureau to maintain the RC-26 or move to a different aircraft that could continue to support the RC-26’s domestic missions.

However, the U.S. Air Force decided to retire all of its RC-26 aircraft at the end of 2022 in a move to modernize operations. This decision does not affect the Wisconsin National Guard’s C-26 aircraft, which is an Army aircraft that does not have the capability to provide the observation support of the Air Force RC-26.

Wisconsin's RC-26 completed its final flight Dec. 28 at Truax Field in Madison.

"The aircrew who have flown this mission are deeply saddened to see it come to an end," West said. "It has never been about the aircraft — rather it was always about the mission. To see this mission end has cut deeply."

The mission will, however, continue without the RC-26. The Wisconsin Counterdrug Program works with schools and community organizations to reduce demand for illegal drugs through education, and partners with the statewide drug takeback program to dispose of surplus prescription medication that could be abused. Meanwhile, the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs is looking into additional options to fill the void left by the RC-26 retirement.

While the RC-26's time has come to an end, West said there is a deep sense of pride in the thousands of missions flown and recognizing that there are untold numbers of people alive today due to the unheralded efforts of this quiet eye in the sky.

"The crews are proud of their unmatched safety record," West said. "They are proud of their mission accomplishment percentages where almost 85 percent of the flying hours were directly tied to mission support, with only 15 percent of hours being set aside for training."

Over the next three months, the remaining RC-26 aircraft will make their way to Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Tuscon, or to Meridian, for demilitarization.

"The planes are true warbirds having served for decades with an enviable safety record and a list of mission accomplishments that will live long in the memories of the Airmen fortunate enough to participate," West said.

Felician agreed.

"Not many aircraft that have the capability of the RC-26," Felician said. "There's just no comparison — bar none, it was the best domestic operations aircraft out there."

Capt. Leslie Westmont contributed to this article.