

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Deployed Wisconsin Air Guard members meeting deployment challenges in Guam

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More than 100 members from the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 128th Air Refueling Wing (ARW) have been deployed to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam since around Christmas last year, supporting the 506th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron (EARS) as part of the U.S. Pacific Command.

Recently, Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, visited the 506th, and said the deployed Wisconsin Air National Guard Airmen were making quite an impression.

"It's clear they are intent on leaving the mission better than they found it," Knapp said. "They are all in, not content to simply do the minimum effort."

Lt. Col. Michael Pauls, the officer in charge of the deployed 128th ARW members supporting the 506th EARS, said that the deployment has been challenging thus far, but successful.

"We have been tasked with dozens of high-priority missions all over the Pacific area of responsibility," Pauls explained. "The aircrews have been enjoying the different mission sets flown these past two months. Within one week they could be refueling a reconnaissance aircraft over disputed waters, supporting a B-1 bomber on a short-notice recall mission, or being on alert in Alaska."

The 128th Airmen are part of an effort to provide in-flight refueling for fighter

aircraft, airlift assets and bombers in support of continuous bomber task force presence and theater security packages in the Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific Command is one of six U.S. geographic combatant commands, and encompasses roughly half of the earth's surface stretching from the U.S. west coast to the western border of India, and reaching from the North Pole to Antarctica.

Senior Master Sgt. Ryan Branz, aerospace ground support equipment production supervisor on this deployment — and the current Wisconsin Air National Guard first sergeant of the year — sought to dispel the notion that a deployment to Guam is little more than a vacation.

“With heightened tensions in today's world, we have a very important mission,” Branz said. To cover the busy scheduling demands, they “assembled an A team and a B team, each to work every other day — including weekends and holidays. Those shifts range anywhere from 10 to 14 hours to cover early launches, late recoveries and countless maintenance actions. We've also been tasked with several forward deployments within the Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility. During this timeframe, a third of the maintenance crew is gone, leaving us operating with a skeleton crew here. No one complains about the long hours. Everyone is raising their hand to volunteer when asked to step up.”

Lt. Col. Kristin Rebholz, deployed 128th officer in charge of maintenance, agreed that the variety of missions is keeping the refuelers on their toes.

“The forward deployments at the beginning of our trip provided arctic weather training and support,” Rebholz said. “The small teams from maintenance that were sent out learned how to maximize their skills with limited personnel and, at times, limited resources and still made the mission happen — which is great and what we expect to happen.”

Senior Master Sgt. Jeffrey Lampe, an aviation resource manager, said flexibility is key to the deployed Airmen learning to work together and accomplish the mission.

“The individuals on this deployment performed above and beyond expectations,” Lampe said. “I couldn't have asked for a better group to be with.”

While the 506th Expeditionary Air Refueling Group is a permanent resident of the U.S. Air Force's 36th Operations Group, it is staffed by Air National Guard members from air refueling units across the country. The 506th depends on Air National

Guard KC-135 stratotankers to work alongside active duty and Air Force Reserve aircraft to provide the aerial refueling and airlift capabilities that support critical U.S. Indo-Pacific Command missions.

Rebholz said learning from their active duty counterparts has been valuable, and that the deployed 128th Airmen are also trying to educate their active duty counterparts on what the National Guard brings to the table.

“In Milwaukee we have better autonomy, relationships built and a hard-working culture that really wants to get the job done,” Rebholz explained. “Being the ‘guest unit,’ you spend a lot of time getting acclimated, trying to explain your importance and existence, and shortly after it’s time to go.”

She said the deployed Airmen have learned quite a bit so far, information they can share with the home unit when they return.

“I loved seeing the increased camaraderie and teamwork the deployment was bringing about among the Airmen,” Knapp said. He presented challenge coins to some of the deployed 128th Airmen, as well as members of the Guam National Guard supporting the visit.

Pauls said the Wisconsin Airmen have learned how to operate with the KC-135’s current limitations and issues.

“In the middle of our deployment, 75 percent of our deployed aircraft were grounded due to a potential safety issue,” Pauls said. “Despite these unexpected events, we were able to meet the operation requirements that the 506th EARS was tasked with.”

Pauls said the deployed Airmen determined how to have the 128th Air Refueling Wing send flyable refuelers to Andersen Air Force Base, as well as properly return the grounded aircraft, to meet the needs of the mission.

Tech. Sgt. Lavontae Harper, a boom operator, said “flexibility is the key to airpower” has been their motto on this deployment.

“With the ever-changing and growing mission here in the Pacific, our deployers have shown nothing but professionalism and resiliency,” Harper said. “Consistently adjusting to the mission, doing whatever needs to be done to make the mission happen, sacrificing personal time to ensure mission continuation and leaving no

stone unturned to find a solution to all problems that may come our way — that is what this deployment has been filled with.”

“In 16-plus years, I’ve never had a better trip,” said Master Sgt. Chad Crull, a metals technician. He said it’s been a great experience to see service counterparts and international partners participate in Pacific Command exercises.

“This kind of training is especially valuable and salient today as we work to ensure our military is prepared for any conflict, especially in the increasingly strategic Pacific regions,” Knapp said.

This is the first deployment for many of the 128th ARW Airmen, and certainly the first to Guam for others. But the 128th has deployed to Guam in the past.

“The deployments we completed to Guam less than a year ago look completely different,” Pauls said. “The Air Force is moving to the Agile Combat Employment construct in the way we employ airpower. Andersen is the petri dish for that as we learn in the tanker community to develop an expeditionary mindset.”

Pauls said the deployed 128th Airmen have had opportunities to relay their thoughts and concerns on streamlining and improving the Air National Guard’s ability to deploy throughout the Pacific Command.

“You want to talk about multi-capable Airmen?” Branz asked. “I’m seeing all that right here without any formal training. I see specialists out there launching aircraft, crew chiefs helping out with back shop maintenance I even saw a med-tech marshalling in an aircraft.

“We might be in a tropical paradise, but it’s the people here that make this place so amazing,” Branz continued. “I’m truly blessed to be a part of this deployed team.”

Lampe said he was quite impressed with how well trained the junior enlisted are, and how they perform their duties.

“That’s a testament to their dedication and the training they receive from their home station trainers and mentors,” Lampe said. “The 128th ARW is in good hands.”

Master Sgt. Adam Olena, a maintainer, agreed.

“It’s really cool to see all the young Airmen working together,” he said. “They are all teaching each other their respective jobs. The excitement they show towards applying their skill se to real-world missions is amazing.”

The deployed 128th ARW Airmen expect to return in late March.