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Deepwater Horizon airspace activity now coordinated at 601st AOC

By Lt. Col. Susan A. Romano, AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – As the Deepwater Horizon Response Operation enters Week 13 since the rig exploded April 20 in the Gulf of Mexico, senior Department of Defense and Homeland Security officials made the decision to centralize airspace management operations in the 601st Air & Space Operations Center here due to the organization's 'inherent and unique skill set' when dealing with airspace deconfliction and ability to respond to natural and man-made disasters.

The Aviation Coordination Command was created to alleviate the burden the U.S. Coast Guard was undertaking since the response mission began 85+ days ago. Coast Guard Capt. Mike Emerson was tapped as director of the ACC to manage and coordinate the abundance of aviation resources currently operating in the Gulf Region.

"Our primary role is to ensure the safe and efficient use of the temporary flight restriction area where several hundred airframes operate on a daily basis," said Captain Emerson. "By centralizing the management of resources and aircraft activity in the Gulf, we can integrate the air campaign and work closely with the affected states' incident command posts."

The 601st AOC is no stranger to responding to natural disasters. In the wake of the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, the 601st AOC was tasked to assist with airspace deconfliction and air flow in and out of the Port-au-Prince airport, while maximizing the efficient use of inbound and outbound air traffic. The organization took what some pilots called 'a big giant hairball' of air traffic and streamlined air operations to get much-needed aid to the Haitian people.



"The decision to move airspace coordination operations to the 601st AOC makes complete sense," said Captain Emerson. "The men and women of U.S. Northern Command's air component have world-class capabilities and expertise when it comes to airspace management and deconfliction, and we've been able to leverage that to our advantage. Things like access to networks, shared databases, common operating pictures and full motion video have proven to be invaluable to the initial success of the ACC."

"Likewise, they bring experience from past events like the earthquake in Haiti that you just can't glean from a textbook or corporate manual," he said.

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On any given day, the temporary flight restriction area – or TFR – sees up to 135 various types of aircraft – fish and oil spotters, banner towers, boom operators, spray flights, oil platform helicopters, media representatives, general aviation pilots, state and federal participants, and military aircraft. The TFR covers a 20,000 square mile radius up to an altitude of 3,000' (which excludes commercial airliners) and the Federal Aviation Administration dictates the required compliance within that airspace.



“Our job is to ensure all aircraft flying in the affected area are FAA-compliant while operating in a safe, manageable environment,” Captain Emerson said.

Currently, the 601st AOC has approximately 75 members supporting the ACC. The support covers a broad spectrum of backgrounds and services, including active duty Air Force and Navy personnel, federal and state National Guardsmen and civil servants.

“In addition to the AOC’s participation in the ACC,” said Col Randy Spear, 601st AOC commander, “we also have several liaison officers from the FAA, the Department of Interior, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Coast Guard and BP, just to name a few. “Their input is critical to our overall operation because they are on hand to coordinate activities between their parent organization and the ACC.

They also provide technical and subject matter expertise and are able to offer vital interface with the many interagencies that are supporting clean-up efforts in the Gulf.”

While the DOD is known for the mass and speed when responding to disasters of this scope, the ACC director is quick to point out that this is not exclusively a military operation.

“The U.S. Coast Guard remains the lead federal agency for the Deepwater Horizon response, but there are dozens of private and non-government organizations participating in recovery efforts,” said Captain Emerson, “and our role could change at any time, depending on how events unfold.”

Emerson, a career C-130 pilot and Coast Guardsman, came to Tyndall from Washington, D.C., where he serves as the Chief of Aviation Forces for the Coast Guard. His aviation background is extensive, having flown in operations in the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean for the past 20 years.

And despite being the ACC director for just 21 days, the seasoned maritime aviator approaches his role not only with eyes on the mission, but with the citizens of the Gulf in the forefront of his mind.

“Being in such close proximity to the affected shoreline certainly ‘puts a face’ on the individuals, businesses and industries that have been affected by the spill,” he said. “It makes it personal, which prompts me to ensure we are doing everything in our power to help restore this beautiful coastal region as quickly as possible.”

Working closely with the ACC director and his liaison officers is the 601st AOC’s Intelligence & Reconnaissance Division. The IRD is providing satellite imagery to help locate surface slicks, recover spewing oil, and minimize environment impacts. The collected imagery is passed to the command and control elements at the Incident Command Posts in New Orleans, Mobile, Ala., or Miami, who then assign spotters and skimmers to the affected areas.

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“The IRD folks are able to provide near-real time imagery from the Gulf to the Unified Area Command, which ultimately helps to streamline the efficiency and effectiveness for the on-scene responders,” said Colonel Spear.

Along with support to the ACC, Air Forces Northern deployed an Air Component Coordination Element liaison officer and Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officers to the Unified Area Command in New Orleans. The ACCE serves as the Air Force’s subject matter expert on movement of Air Forces assets in and out of the region, while the EPLOs help the federal on-scene commander procure military logistics, medical, security and public affairs assets, if requested.

“The Deepwater Horizon incident has affected us all – not just those along the Gulf Coast, but across the nation, and we will continue to assist in any way we can, for as long as our expertise is requested and deemed beneficial to the response operations,” said Maj. Gen. Garry C. Dean, AFNORTH commander. “As our Air Force Chief of Staff frequently says, ‘We’re all in,’ and that certainly holds true for us here at Tyndall as well.”