

ONG welcomes home 28 airmen back from Afghanistan

by Spec. April Dustin, ONG Public

Warrenton, Ore. - The Oregon Air National Guard welcomed home 28 members of the 116th Air Control Squadron from Afghanistan in a formal ceremony held March 3 at Camp Rilea, near Warrenton, Ore., where the unit is based. Twenty-eight members of the 116th Air Control Squadron, Oregon Air National Guard, stand at attention during their official welcome home ceremony Saturday at Camp Rilea near Warrenton, Ore. The unit deployed to Afghanistan for 120 days to provide air command and control for all aerial assets in the Afghanistan area of responsibility. Photo by Spec. April Dustin. The unit deployed in September 2006 for a 120 day tour of duty at Kandahar Air Base in support of Air Expeditionary Force 3 and 4, and Operation Enduring Freedom. During the deployment, the mission of the 116th ACS was to provide air command and control for all aerial assets in the Afghanistan area of responsibility. The unit returned to Oregon in January. In attendance at the ceremony were many political and military dignitaries, including Governor Theodore R. Kulongoski, Adjutant General of Oregon Maj. Gen. Raymond F. Rees, and Commander of the Oregon Air National Guard Brig. Gen. Daniel O'Hollaren who joined family and friends in celebrating the homecoming of the airmen. Governor Kulongoski welcomed the airmen home on behalf of all Oregonians. "You're not just heroes to us, but patriots who have earned a permanent place in the hearts of Oregonians and in the history books of this nation," he said. "So, on behalf of all Oregonians, thank you, God bless you and welcome home." Major General Rees expressed the importance of the unit's accomplishments in Afghanistan. "Some folks have labeled Afghanistan the forgotten war, but make no mistake we've not forgotten you or the superb work you've done for the Oregon National Guard and the United States Air Force," he said. Working with NATO forces from many countries and different branches of the U.S. military, the 116th ACS controlled more than 39,000 aerial missions in less than five months. During these missions, the airmen were responsible for controlling U.S. and coalition fighters and attack aircraft, refueling tankers, transport aircraft, intelligence and surveillance aircraft, and unmanned combat aerial vehicles. Members of the 116th ACS ensured air assets were available to provide air support to coalition ground forces in contact with Taliban and anti-coalition militants. The unit also ensured 100 percent safe passage for more than 17,500 commercial aircraft and civilian aircraft passing through the Afghanistan airspace. "You were given a very important, critical mission to provide air command and control for all aerial assets in the Afghanistan area of responsibility," said Rees. "I don't think many people understand the attention to detail, the skill and the knowledge that's required to accomplish that task." Rees said he was pleased to inform the airmen upon their return to Oregon that while the rest of the U.S. Air Force is shrinking the 116th ACS will grow by another 39 positions, including six full-time positions, as the unit takes on the additional role of providing communications capabilities. "Those of us that are responsible for emergency management and emergency response in the state Oregon are thrilled to know that your steady hand is going to be there to support us in our communications capabilities during emergencies," said Rees. "Your commitment to mission accomplishment is noticeable." Since Sept. 11, 2001 the 116th ACS has also been actively involved in Operation Noble Eagle, deploying nearly a dozen times to assist U.S. Northern Command with Homeland Security operations. All 28 of the airmen who mobilized with the 116th ACS to Afghanistan volunteered for the deployment. They have all earned the Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Air Force Expeditionary Service Ribbon, the Non-Article 5 NATO Medal, the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with "M" device, and the Oregon Faithful Service Ribbon with "M" device. Below is the list of personnel who deployed and where they are from. Among the group are a father and son, as well as a husband and wife. Astoria: Lt. Col. Robert Gregory, Maj. Keith Townsend, Senior Master Sgt. Ralph Lehman, Master Sgt. Don Hillgaertner, Tech. Sgt. George McMahan. Clatskanie: Master Sgt. Albert Luquette. Creswell: Tech. Sgt. Robert Foreman. Hammond: Master Sgt. Adam Melerski, Master Sgt. Troy Mitchell. Hillsboro: Staff Sgt. Laurence Rose. Lebanon: Master Sgt. William Bair. Molalla: Staff Sgt. Michelle Nelson. Monmouth: Maj. Paul Evans. Olympia, Wash.: Lt. Col. Timothy Olson. Oregon City: Master Sgt. Richard Murren. Otis: Tech. Sgt. Carl Domingo. Portland: Tech. Sgt. Matthew Gudge, Capt. Bryan Habas, Capt. Victoria Habas. Redmond: Master Sgt. Randy Dickenson. Vancouver: Tech. Sgt. Bryan Garrett, Tech. Sgt. Edwin Corcoran. Warrenton: Senior Master Sgt. Robert Birman, Senior Master Sgt. Les Wright, Master Sgt. Gary Gudge, Master Sgt. John Jackson. Washougal, Wash.: Capt. Leon McGuire. Cosby, Tennessee: Staff Sgt. Ann Chancey.

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