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Reorganization brings structure, leadership to treaty monitoring center

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – In a week that saw 13 formal ceremonies including 11 activations, five inactivations, and 10 assumptions of command, the Air Force Technical Applications Center here successfully completed its reorganization April 9-13 after more than five years of planning.

The organization change request, better known as “AFTAC 2.0” to the center’s 1,000+ workforce, became reality April 1 and sees the addition of nine new squadrons, two new groups, one new detachment and two new directorates.



“Historically, AFTAC has been structured around mission areas – techniques to gather information with mission area managers who were experts in their respective disciplines,” said Col. Steven M. Gorski, AFTAC commander. “While this type of organizational structure works well in a resource-rich environment, it has inherent mission-effectiveness flaws. Our new organizational flow establishes clear responsibilities with common skills that allow us to develop our workforce more effectively.”

To commemorate this historic event, ceremonies were held in AFTAC’s Doyle M. Northrup Auditorium where members of the center witnessed the transfer of authority to the incoming commanders.

The Groups

The wing is divided into two groups – the 709th Surveillance and Analysis Group and the 709th Support Group. Each group, led by an Air Force O-6, has roughly 400 personnel assigned, military and civilian, and fall under Gorski’s command.

The 709th SAG monitors all suspected and confirmed nuclear detonations underground, above ground or in space and reports their findings to senior decision makers. This vital mission is achieved through five of the nine new squadrons.

“The work we perform reaches all levels of government, to include President of the United States,” said Col. Jonathan VanNoord, 709th SAG commander. “We hear about the giants of long range detection who went before us to forge our vital mission into what it is today; and now before me, I’m looking into the eyes of future giants – Airmen who continue to carry on the important legacy of providing quality technical measurements to command authorities. It’s a historic day for AFTAC.”

The 709th SPTG is AFTAC’s premier support team, providing enterprise information dominance, superior engineering and maintenance, and life-cycle management using innovative and creative processes to enable mission success. Col. Richard Mendez was handed the group’s guidon and will be responsible for ensuring his team establishes and executes logistical and IT requirements.

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“It is an honor and a privilege to carry on the historic roots of our group’s designation that dates back to World War II,” said Mendez. “Our 24/7 global support team stands ready to serve. I appreciate the trust and confidence placed in me to lead the men and women of the 709th Support Group.”

The Squadrons

Prior to the reorg, AFTAC had stood up five squadrons in 2014 after the center became an Air Force wing equivalent. Those five (Technical Surveillance Squadron, Technical Operations Squadron, Technical Support Squadron, Technical Sustainment Squadron and Cyber Capabilities Squadron) were officially inactivated, and their mission responsibilities transferred to the newly-activated squadrons.



The 21st Surveillance Squadron, led by Lt. Col. Ty Miller, executes the Nuclear Debris Collection and Analysis and National Technical Nuclear Forensics missions. Miller and his team will conduct worldwide surveillance via aerial and ground collection. “I’m excited about the direction we’re headed in,” Miller said during his activation ceremony. “We have a huge responsibility to the overall success of this organization, and our role in long range detection is rich and invaluable.”

The 22nd Surveillance Squadron, commanded by Lt. Col. Ed Ferguson, operates AFTAC’s 24/7/365 operations center, providing front-line, persistent and state-of-the-art surveillance to detect, identify and locate nuclear and seismic events worldwide. The squadron’s ballistic missile technical collection mission provides data on foreign ballistic missile tests and supports the Missile Defense Agency.

“In the 22nd, AFTAC has combined its maritime radar assets, two constellations of atmospheric and space sensors, three 24/7 operations facilities, and the cornerstone of our historic mission, alert management,” said Ferguson. “This alignment allows us to optimize our focal point for command and control of our around-the-clock surveillance mission.”

The 23rd Analysis Squadron is headed up by Lt. Col. Jeremy Goodwin. The 23rd ANS is tasked with detecting, identifying and classifying events recorded by a worldwide network of seismic, infrasonic and hydroacoustic sensors used in nuclear treaty monitoring.

“I am very excited to take command of this great group of highly talented men and women,” said Goodwin. “We’ve been preparing for this for the last year, and now we are officially plank owners. I promise that no one will work harder than I will to achieve mission accomplishment.”

The 24th Analysis Squadron sees AFTAC’s first civilian leader at the helm. Thomas Buist, a chemical engineer by trade, worked in the center’s Materials Technology Directorate before being tapped to take over the 24th. The OCR creates opportunity for civilian scientists to serve in significant leadership positions within the center. Buist’s unit provides technical reporting on foreign weapons of mass destruction activities through forensic science. The 24th ANS also supports International Atomic Energy Agency missions and provides meteorological modeling and weather support to all AFTAC mission areas.

“I am thankful for the opportunity to serve the wonderful men and women of the 24th,” said Buist. “It is humbling to know that we now carry the torch held by many great AFTAC Airmen. In their honor, we will proudly and confidently execute the mission and continue to influence the future of our country.”

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The 709th Support Squadron is overseen by Lt. Col. Christopher Hall, who commanded the now-inactivated Technical Sustainment Squadron. Hall's workforce provides deployment readiness oversight, manages warehousing, transportation, life-cycle logistics and enterprise asset management support. He is also oversees all military and civilian personnel actions through human resource management and workforce development efforts. Additionally, the 709th SPTS commander manages AFTAC's facility and infrastructure operations and service contracts – no small feat for a single squadron.

“George Bernard Shaw once said, ‘Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything,’” Hall said during his activation ceremony. “Our squadron’s scope of responsibility has expanded immensely, and I’m grateful for the faith and trust that’s been placed in me on this day of major transition. This squadron will always be aces!”



The 709th Cyberspace Squadron, another one of the original five squadrons that was inactivated, is under the command of Lt. Col. Nathan Loyd. This squadron generates and sustains full-spectrum cyberspace capabilities by providing mission assurance for the center's global information enterprise. Loyd's staff exercises operational management control over cyberspace terrain to ensure national decision makers receive quality technical measurements to monitor nuclear treaty compliance.

“Despite two major hurricanes – one during a real-world nuclear alert, the full migration to Windows 10 (the first organization to do so in 25th Air Force), relocating our contingency operations location from Texas to Tennessee, and transitioning the squadron from CYCS to the 709th, the men and women of my squadron were still able to maintain a 99 percent data availability rating,” said Loyd. “That is a testament to their incredible dedication and work ethic. This mission could not happen without cyber support. Our long-term vision is bright, and we’re making it happen.”

The inactivated Technical Support Squadron is now the 709th Technical Maintenance Squadron, led by Lt. Col. Paul Hendrickson. This unit boasts the largest number of enlisted members of all the squadrons in AFTAC, and is responsible for maintaining and sustaining the center's 3,600 network sensors across the globe. The Airmen of the 709th TMXS conduct depot and in-field maintenance, track sensor network performance, and provides technical assistance to the Systems Development Directorate.

“The men and women of the 709th Technical Maintenance Squadron are phenomenal technicians, maintainers, operators and liaisons,” said Hendrickson. “Together, we will take the best that Air Force maintenance has to offer and merge that with what we do best – and we will be a force to be reckoned with. You have the spirit and the talent to accomplish anything, anywhere, anytime.”

While the facility itself is still called the Ciambrone Radiochemistry Laboratory, the official squadron designation is now the USAF Radiochemistry Laboratory, with Lt. Col. James Thomas as its commander. The “Lab Rats” conduct nuclear measurements and radiochemistry operations to detect, isolate, quantify and analyze nuclear materials in support of AFTAC's nuclear treaty monitoring mission. Thomas also manages the Harkins Laboratory located at Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, Colo., which supports AFTAC's low-level radiation detection research.

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“Our job is to look beyond the battlefield – to look into the scientific shadows seeking trace amounts of particles and debris to discriminate non-weapons sources of radionuclides from potential nuclear weapons test debris,” said Thomas. “The Lab Rats work day in and day out to support our nation and its allies, and I’m incredibly proud to command such a professional group of Airmen.”

The Detachments

AFTAC operates more than two dozen detachments and operating locations worldwide. Adding to the list of stateside and overseas locations is Detachment, 709th SPTG. Det 1 will provide support the application and execution of scarce research and development resources to the warfighter and national customers. Det 1 personnel will also provide various government agencies with demonstration and testing capabilities and will coordinate execution of new initiatives at national laboratories.



“This is the finest team I have ever worked with in my career,” said Lt. Col. David Laird, Det 1 commander. “It is truly an honor to be selected as their commander and I’m very excited as I look forward to the innovative ways we’ll be solving technological hurdles for the Department of Defense.”

Gorski showered his leadership team with praise and offered each commander a piece of sage advice.

“The leaders who have taken command of their respective groups and squadrons were selected because they are the best of the best,” said Gorski. “They have demonstrated the will to succeed, the need for excellence in all they do, and the drive to ensure the mission is accomplished. I urge each of them to remember that they’ll have daily challenges that may seem insurmountable as they face them, but some of the most successful leaders in history are the ones who lead through adversity. As the saying goes, ‘The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.’ This is a new and exciting chapter in AFTAC’s history, and I have the greatest amount of trust in each and every one of them.”