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Historical Hickam Unit honored for aviation pioneering

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A ceremony held Aug. 19 marked a day of celebration for the first successful aerial recovery mission performed by the 6594th Test Group and the 6493rd Test Squadron – both former units operating from Hickam Air Force Base. Held at the historic flag pole in the center of Atterbury Circle, the ceremony honored former members of the two units and unveiled a plaque immortalizing their mission.

Activated in 1958, the 6594th TG and 6593rd TS missions were to recover de-orbited re-entry capsules re-entering earth's atmosphere as part of the National Reconnaissance Office's (NRO) "Corona" project. According to retired Air Force Gen. Bruce Carlson, director for the NRO, the need for the services provided by these two units arose from the Cold War.

"History defined what these organizations did and these organizations helped define what history did in the United States," Carlson said. "It was imperative that we begin to keep track of our enemy In order to keep

track of what the other guy was doing, we had to overfly their territory and we did that several times in high-altitude airplanes and that worked fairly well.”

It was at this time the U.S. began an aggressive space program in which reconnaissance operatives would fly a satellite over the Soviet Union, perform 13-17 revolutions while taking photos from orbit, and recover the images contained in parachuted capsules for analysis. After ejecting from the satellite, a capsule’s main parachute would open at approximately 55,000 feet. After visually spotting a capsule, recovery passes would begin at approximately 15,000 feet and were typically successful in catching a capsule on the first or second pass by a special hook arrangement attached to a 25-foot pole suspended below the aircraft’s tail. The unit employed five JC-130 recovery aircraft and two helicopters to carry out the aerial portion of the mission.

The unit was deactivated in 1986 and had a reputation for great accuracy. NRO historical reports confirmed 100 percent capsule recovery (90 of which were aerial recoveries) in the last seven years of the project. Both water and ground recovery teams were used to retrieve any capsules that were not aerially recovered. Carlson praised the members of the two units for their incredible success with limited technology.

“There wasn’t a lot of high-tech technology involved in it. It was essentially a hook, some rope, and a wind-up gizmo and I am stunned by the amount of success you had. When you actually did that and demonstrated to the national command authority that this was going to be normal operations from now on, it gave an incredible boost to our ability to fight the Cold War,” Carlson noted.

Col. Sam Barrett, 15th Wing commander, explained that the 6594th TG and 6593rd TS can be credited with four historical milestones in reconnaissance and aviation: first return of an object placed in earth’s orbit, first collection of pictures of earth from space, first space program with more than one returned capsule, and first space program to reach 100 missions.

“What a mission you had – catching free-falling objects from outer space is no small feat,” Barrett said. “In your day, the test group was the only organization in the free world to accomplish such a mission. The stakes were high – our national security depended on it.”

Carlson also cited the importance of the two units’ mission and the strategic advantage it provided at a critical time in history as well as a lasting effect on military heritage.

“What you did was give us an incredible advantage, an asymmetric advantage over our enemy. Your pioneering work in overhead reconnaissance gave the confidence we need,” he said. “What you demonstrated was that we could do this kind of stuff.”

“We could do other things that other people only dreamed about – that other people only thought about,” he continued. “I hope today, as you sit here and remember the experiences you had, you’ll take a few minutes and reflect on the significant accomplishments you made to national security and the United States of America,” Carlson said.

Barrett also thanked the members of these historical units and expressed the shared gratitude of active duty Airmen serving today.

“The opportunity to rub shoulders with true pioneers in reconnaissance and aviation is special. Several thousand personnel were stationed here at Hickam during the almost 30 years of the Corona project,” he said. “These people walked the same streets, they worked in the same buildings, and they lived in some of the same houses that Airmen live in today. I’d say that makes us family – Air Force family, and that makes us very special...it is an honor and a privilege to stand on this hallowed ground with you,” Barrett said.
