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Hickam aircrew hones skills in Pacific Northwest

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The drizzling rain and cold temperatures of the Pacific Northwest are not a substitute for the sunshine and palm trees of the Hawaiian Islands, but a Hickam C-17 Globemaster III aircrew is toughing out the elements to hone their skills in the airlift arsenal.

The 535th Airlift Squadron (AS) aircrew trained in unrestricted descent assault landings, air drop, combat offloads, air refueling, night vision goggle training, combat offloads, low levels, mountainous terrain, threat responses and multiple ship formation training during a five-day training trip to Washington on Nov 12-17.

“The Pacific Northwest offers a plethora of training opportunities that we don’t get on the islands of Hawaii,” said Capt. Dave Morales, 535th AS pilot. “Specifically, the mountainous terrain allows us to get low toward the ground when we fly our terrain following low levels.”

Of the many flight training limitations in Hawaii, getting realistic flight instrumentation, assault landing, and drop zone experience is on the top of the list. The weather patterns in Hawaii that hover around 80 degrees and partly cloudy are an environment where strictly instrumentation flying is not necessary.

“They (Washington) have a couple of IFR (instrument flight rules) drop corridors that allow us to actually fly in the weather to a drop zone and conduct airdrop,” Morales said. “Weather is always an issue here.”

Grant County, Wash., near Moses Lake, has a 3,500-foot assault landing zone where pilots get the opportunity to practice assault landings without any simulation. Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay has a simulated assault landing field, but according to the pilot nothing is better than landing on the real thing.

“It’s a realistic approach to an assault landing, where you have to put that aircraft down on a very small runway,” Morales said. “That’s something once again we don’t get to do over at Kaneohe Bay which is our primary training base.”

They took a look at the area during the day, flying low level and air drop patterns. They also took a look at the military training route under the cover of darkness, through the eyes of the night vision goggles.

“The pilots are getting a ton of training out of it,”

Morales said. “Just being in the cockpit, absorbing all that, is great training in and of itself.”

According to Capt. Rob Greeson, 535th AS pilot, taking a look at the training area, drop zone and assault landing airstrip during the day and at night are two totally different experiences. Performing an unrestricted descent for a tactical arrival on an actual assault landing zone at night while wearing the night vision goggles does not have the peripheral rush of the ground as the airplane gets closer to touchdown.

"It's like a video game, in that you only concentrate on what is in your line of sight," Greeson said. "During the day, you can see how short the runway really is. At night, all you see is five lights and the data the airplane gives you. There is no ground rush. You have to trust the instrumentation."

Training like this is a stepping stone in proficiency and leads to larger formations, like those conducted at the Mobility Air Forces Exercise in Las Vegas, Nev. Throughout the training in Washington, Morales, a U.S. Air Force Weapons School graduate, is making sure the four pilots on the training mission are cycled through the cockpit for the training they need.

Staff Sgt. Jason Jones, 535th AS loadmaster, has been with the crew every step of the way, training in the back of the airplane while the pilots hone their tactical skills.

"I'm getting a lot of crucial real world training that is not available at Hickam," Jones said. "There are some inherent limitations to Hickam Field and even Kaneohe Bay airstrip that keeps loadmasters from performing currency items such as combat offloads. We have to stay current and proficient on many aspects of flying and get it on missions like this," he added.

For pilots in the airdrop program, they go through a sequential training plan to get qualified to conduct airdrops. The planning for a multi-ship air drop is crucial for both the pilots and the loadmasters. In large formations, the decisions made by one aircraft affect every other aircraft in trail.

Inherent and crucial to flying operations, lots of time has been spent planning each training mission. Their training will culminate at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. On Nov. 18 while participating in the Mobility Air Forces Exercises 10-B, an 18-ship formation, as the final project for the weapons school students.