

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT...OR IS IT?

BY MAJ. ANNI MU LOEB AND CAPT. NATALIE ROWELL

Imagine another Katrina-scale hurricane hitting the Gulf Coast or Hawaii, robbing them of all communications. Staff at the 162nd Combat Communications Group (CCG) have spent a lot of time thinking about just such a scenario, and are turning to an old technology to meet modern crises.

The 162nd CCG, in coordination with the Arizona Air National Guard, has demonstrated the capability to deploy the Combat SkySat, a balloon platform providing much needed communications to affected areas. SkySat is a high-altitude communications relay system, which is ideally suited to support domestic homeland operations.

The purpose of disaster relief using SkySat is to rapidly establish initial command and control for civil authorities. Much like a low-flying satellite, the payload provides communications to the affected area and can provide coverage synchronized to a specific operation for up to eight hours. Additional balloons can be launched to extend coverage.

The Combat SkySat has the ability to provide cellular and landline phone service, Internet access, and handheld radio communications to mul-

tip locations, as demonstrated during recent exercises over the last two years.

In July 2008 in Gulfport, Miss., the 162nd CCG and 147th Combat Communications Squadron exercised their ability to respond rapidly to civilian and National Guard authorities who were providing disaster relief by utilizing the SkySat. When National Guardsmen are deployed to an affected region, communications support will transition from first responder to National Guard networks to support the growing military response utilizing this technology.

In June 2007, the 162nd Combat Communications Group and the Hawaii Air National Guard's 291st Combat Communications Squadron partnered with Arizona's Detachment 2 to demonstrate their ability to establish communications across the islands of Hawaii in the event of an earthquake or any other natural disaster that might cause communications capabilities to become inoperable.

SkySat could benefit the state of California by providing a communications system for first responders to use during emergencies or natural

disasters. The system has been successfully tested in both urban and mountainous environments. The system has very few line-of-sight problems because the balloon and payload operate at great heights.

In the end, the California Air National Guard's old-school techniques might be the best bet in meeting rapid-response needs of the future.



Major General Dennis G. Lucas, chief of the California National Guard's Air Division, takes part in recent 162nd Combat Communications Group training involving the Combat SkySat. The SkySat enables the Air Guard to set up emergency communications networks in the event of major natural disasters, such as hurricanes Katrina and Ike.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE 162ND COMBAT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

AIR GUARD HELPS CHILDREN COPE WITH PARENTS' DEPLOYMENT

STORY AND PHOTO BY BARB DRAUGHON



The 144th Fighter Wing's Chief Master Sgt. Johnny Leal demonstrates how to prepare a Meal-Ready-to-Eat to campers at the Purple Camp at the Sequoia Lake Camp Gaines YMCA. The Camp helps children of deployed service members learn to cope with their family members' absence.

Operation Purple Camp's Military Day at the Sequoia Lake Camp Gaines YMCA was designed to help the children of service members to have a fuller concept of what life is like for their deployed parents.

When military support was requested for this first-time central California camp, Family Program coordinators from the 129th Rescue Wing, 144th Fighter Wing and 146th Airlift Wing joined with the 144th's Chief Master Sgt. Johnny Leal and other volunteers to meet the need. They gathered uniforms, chemical gear, MREs and gave away items to create an inviting display to honor these young military dependents dealing with the challenges and often confusing concepts of deployment, separation and reintegration of their loved ones.

Representatives from all the Armed Forces components were present with military vehicles, equipment

and hands-on displays for the children to gain greater insight into their parent's jobs, and why they must sometimes deploy for training and the Global War on Terrorism.

Young campers who visited the camp tried on uniforms and chemical gear, sampled MREs, and read through Airman's manuals. The 144th Fighter Wing's pilot and chemical-gear mannequins were also available for photo opportunities, while instructors explained how to use Air Force equipment and encouraged campers that their family members were participating in a valuable role of maintaining freedom in the United States and abroad.

For more information on 2009 Operation Purple Camps throughout California contact the California Child & Youth Program by e-mailing Rebecca.mcphetridge@us.army.mil or logging on at www.nmf.org.