

Offutt-based recon jet flying routes off Gaza coast

Steve Liewer Omaha World-Herald

A 55th Wing jet with an Offutt-based crew has been flying surveillance missions off the coast of Israel and Lebanon in the days since Hamas militants kidnapped and murdered Israelis near the Gaza Strip.

The RC-135V Rivet Joint reconnaissance plane deployed to Souda Bay — a U.S. naval facility on the Greek island of Crete — Oct. 12, five days after the terror attacks.

Two days later, the plane flew its first mission over the eastern Mediterranean Sea within 100 miles of Israel, Lebanon and Gaza, according to the flight-tracking website FlightRadar24.

Since then, the jet — a 59-year-old four-engine jet, tail number 64-14842 — has flown a similar track at least eight more times, according to a former Rivet Joint crew member who monitors 55th Wing traffic through the site. He asked to be identified by his social media handle, [@MeNMyRC](#).

In a statement, the Air Force confirmed the Rivet Joint's deployment to Souda Bay.

"In general, the RC-135 provides U.S. officials with near real-time, on-scene intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities which contributes to awareness of regional events," said Lt. Col. Justin Brockhoff, a spokesman for U.S. Air Forces in Europe, in a statement. "In order to protect operational security, further information is not available for release at this time."

The crews have not tried to hide their presence, broadcasting their position and other flight information with an electronic transponder using technology called Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast (ADS-B). Military aircraft have the option of turning it off if they wish to fly unobserved.

Most of the flights have taken place at night, said [@MeNMyRC](#). Typically the patrols are about seven hours long, but the longest has lasted more than 11 hours. After the first mission on Oct. 14, additional flights took place Oct. 18, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31 and Nov. 2.

The Rivet Joint jets carry gear that can intercept signals from electronic devices including radar, radios and cell phones up to about 300 miles away. The crews include linguists and analysts who can make sense of intercepted voice communications in real time, even in Arabic or other languages of the region.

Rep. Don Bacon, a former RC-135 electronics warfare officer and 55th Wing commander, said the Rivet Joint can gather intelligence useful to the U.S. and its friends in the region.

Potentially, he said, it could pick up phone or electronic communications by Hamas about the location of more than 200 hostages kidnapped during the Oct. 7 raid.

“Our guys are going to study all the threats,” Bacon said. “Israel’s our ally. If there’s an ability to use that to help capture our hostages, then we’ll do that.”

The eastern Mediterranean has been familiar territory for Rivet Joint crews for decades. 55th Wing veterans say the jets have been flying similar tracks since the 1970s.

“We flew every day for 10½ hours,” said retired Air Force Col. Michael Cook of Bellevue, who commanded an RC-135 squadron in Greece from 1989-91, and later was an air attaché in Athens.

Then, as now, the Middle East was a tinderbox. The Gulf War broke out during Cook’s tenure after Iraq invaded and seized control of Kuwait. Israel was in perpetual conflict with its neighbors over the issue of Palestine. Syria, Egypt and Turkey were all just over the horizon.

At the time, the Air Force did not openly discuss its missions. But it didn’t try to cloak them, either.

“That was in a full radar environment,” Cook said. “Every [air] traffic control knew we were flying there.”

But according to records kept by @MeNMYRc, in the past year Rivet Joints have rarely flown the familiar Eastern Med track, which runs south of Cyprus, parallel to the Israel-Lebanon coastline. He could find only one, in August, which took place during a military exercise called [Agile Spartan](#).

The RC-135 is not the only U.S. reconnaissance plane operating in the region. Navy P-8A Poseidon and EP-3 Aries aircraft also have been operating in the area, according to @MeNMyRC, possibly in coordination with [two carrier strike groups](#) now in the Mediterranean.