

Like swallows returning to Capistrano, the New York Air National Guard's 109th Tactical Airlift Wing's "Raven Gang" and its ski-equipped C-130D Hercules aircraft show up at Sondrestrom AB, Greenland every April, right on schedule.

It's a rite of spring that is not lost on this Danish possession, the largest island in the world (and one of the coldest).

Thus when the ski-birds descend on this Arctic Circle base for their annual tour of duty, as they did recently following a flight from Schenectady, N.Y., Greenlanders knew for sure that the long winter night soon would give way to a near 24-hour daylight summer.

An even greater welcome was accorded the "Raven Gang" propjets and crewmen by the Air Defense Tactical Air Command technicians manning the isolated Distant Early

Warning (DEW) Line radar sites out on the 1.5 mile high ice cap.

During April and May, five C-130Ds from the 109th TAG hauled almost a half-million gallons of fuel to the ice cap radar sites, making about 100 round trips to "DYE II" and 50 round trips to "DYE III."

"We would be unable to carry out our task or to operate at all without the help of those New York Guardsmen and their ski-birds," declared Al Simonson, manager of the DYE II radar site.

In June, the ski-birds hauled 1,200 tons of cargo to DYE III to enable workmen to "jack up" the radar site 25 feet. In July, the C-130s airlifted a National Science Foundation research team to the center of the ice cap — to a site located at an elevation of 10,405 feet. The NSF team was "put in" on the site July 11, and brought out July 26.

This marks the ninth year the 109th has carried out the Greenland airlift for the ADTAC. The New Yorkers inherited the mission from the Alaskan Air Command in 1975, along with its 11 C-130s, five of them equipped with skis. Since then, 109th crews, most from the Albany/Schenectady area, have carried out a very efficient and near accident-free mission in one of the world's most hazardous flying environments.

In addition to the fuel oil portion of the mission, the Air Guard "Raven Gang" also airlifts heavy equipment such as bulldozers and cranes to the sites, along with heavy, oversized items such as structural steel.

The entire DEW Line buildings and equipment owe their presence, on the ice cap to the fleet of Lockheed ski-birds. "Every piece of building and equipment you see here . . .

Return of the Raven Gang

by Joseph Dabney
Lockheed-Georgia Co.



everything it took to construct these sites," said Simonson, "was brought in here by those C-130s. Any major heavy equipment we have must be airlifted in by C-130."

During the short summer airlift season, crewmen from the 109th pray for enough "happiness days" to get the job done.

"Up here" said Lt. Col. Thomas Leonard, 1984 "VOLANT DEW" mission commander, "a happiness day is flying out to the DYE site and finding the weather clear."

It was particularly important to Colonel Leonard that he obtain such a day when he and the 109th safety officer, Lt. Col. Thomas Noel, made their first 1984 ski-Hercules flight to the Ice Cap, after a six-month absence. The advance plane's flight had a crucial objective . . . to visually check the landing site from the air, then land on it and make sure all

was well for the other four airplanes coming in successive flights.

"We've flown out when we couldn't see anything out there . . . like flying in a Ping-Pong ball," said Leonard.

On the initial 1984 "sortie" to the ice cap, Leonard and Noel were rewarded with a beautiful "happiness day." The crew was able to spot the first radar site from 50 miles away, as a small dot on the horizon.

The landing at DYE II, with a gentle swishing sound from the plane's main skis, was an anti-climax. Shortly after dropping off a package of mail and picking up the crew's lunch, the C-130 taxied out through the snow field and lifted off gently from the skiway, heading to "DYE III." That site was found in good order, also.

The following day, two of the 109th ski-birds took off early from Sondrestrom AB, each loaded with

3,200 gallons of fuel oil, some 22,400-pounds worth. On that first airlift day, the two birds logged two sorties apiece to DYE II, hauling 12,800 gallons of fuel to the remote site. Most of the Guardsmen spend two weeks on the ice and then are relieved by a rotating group of airmen and maintenance technicians.

The 109th — flying the older "A" model ski Hercules that were built more than 25 years ago — is scheduled to receive eight new advanced model Hercules aircraft this fall. Four will be ski-and-wheel LC-130Hs, while four others will be standard "H" models that the Raven Gang flyers call "wheelies."

"We are eager to get our new aircraft," declared Col. Stan Hemstreet, commander of the 109th. "The new ski-birds, we are pleased to note, will be direct descendants of the old faithful C-130Ds that have done a great job for our country for over 25 years."

ar

(Far left) Sondrestrom ground crew heats up engines of a C-130D Hercules in preparation for a trip to the ice cap . . . (Left) Some 3,200 gallons of fuel oil is off loaded at DYE II radar site . . . (Below) Lt. Col. Thomas Leonard (with glasses), 1984 VOLANT DEW mission commander, and Lt. Col. Thomas Noel, 109th TAG safety officer, set up headquarters at Sondrestrom . . . (Right) An air-to-air shot of a ski-equipped C-130D. (Photos by Joe Dabney)

