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Guard air defense units protect nation's capital

By Air Force Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith
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WASHINGTON (4/21/10) – Although you don't see them, Soldiers from the 174th Air Defense Artillery Brigade of the Ohio National Guard see you anytime you fly into the nation's capital.

“What we bring to the fight is a ground-based, air defense capability that didn't exist on 9/11,” said Col. Paul Craft, commander of Task Force Phoenix. “Along with our partners in the Air Force, we provide a 24-hour-a-day defense of our nation's capital.”

The task force, which is headquartered here at Bolling Air Force Base, is one of the largest missions under Operation Noble Eagle and charged with defending 2,500 square miles of air space over the District of Columbia and its surrounding communities.

“What a great opportunity to be able to come to our nation's capital as National Guard Soldiers and know that we are providing a layer of defense to our national leadership,” said Army Capt. Luke Fedlam, the personnel officer for the Joint Air Defense operations center. “A lot of people don't know about the National Guard playing a role in homeland defense. They know a lot about the overseas missions and providing disaster relief, but to be able to provide that day-to-day national defense of our nation's capital ... what a great opportunity.”

Craft said the unit uses standard Army air defense artillery equipment, including Avengers, Stingers, MANPADS and Sentinel radars – “all those things that you would assume would be associated with an Army air defense mission.”

Ohio provides command and control for the task force and Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 263rd Air Defense Artillery Brigade, South Carolina National Guard man the posts in 24-hour shifts.

“We just monitor the system and make sure the radar link doesn't go down,” said Sgt. Mark Master of the 263rd. “Any tracks that come in we monitor those as soon as our computer lets us know. That's pretty much it. We just ... monitor the system.”

Soldiers described the numerous checks that aircraft have to follow to enter the air space, which can tip them off to violations. They also demonstrated the powerful radar systems, which allow them to look at air traffic in a very detailed manner.

“It picks up helicopters, fixed wing, rotary wing, cruise missiles ... just about anything,” said Spc. Daniel Waddell, also of the 263rd. “It’s a big responsibility, but we trained up pretty hard for it, and we know the equipment.”

Both units said they are proud to be selected for this mission as the first and possibly last line of defense against another airborne attack on this city.

“They come with a skill set from their employers, their civilian jobs ... some of them with active duty experience,” said Fedlam. “We have a very unique group of individuals that came together with very diverse backgrounds, very diverse skills sets, that really put together an absolutely winning team.”