

The Oregonian

Rich memories take wing

Reunion - The 304th Rescue Squadron fetes 50 years while the 939th refueling wing closes

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MELISSA NAVAS

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Stacks of memories lay strewn across the table in photo album collections of missions to Kosovo and helicopters once cared for -- times too rich to forget.

So new piles formed as current and former members of the 304th Rescue Squadron pulled their favorites for safekeeping in the photo free-for-all.

Sunday was a day for memories, barbecue and helicopters at a picnic celebrating more than 50 years of service by the U.S. Air Force Reserve unit, though the event was tinged with sadness. The 939th Air Refueling Wing, which the squadron is a part of, will close shop Saturday.

The closure of the aircraft refueling wing was part of a 2005 federal decision that closed 22 major bases and reconfigured 33 others to save an estimated \$4.2 billion.

About 600 full- and part-time jobs were lost after eight refueling planes were relocated to other bases in 2006. More than 300 remaining support personnel will relocate to bases out of state, take jobs with other military units or move on to other work. The 304th, which has about 120 people assigned to it, will remain at the base.

"A lot of good memories, and sad ones now," said Sam Barnett, of Monmouth, who was a full-time technician with the squadron for 23 years until his retirement in 1993. "A lot of these people we probably won't see ever again."

About 400 reservists and their friends and family attended the event at the Portland Air Base with many reminiscing about the good old days. Well-known for its high-profile civilian rescues on Mount Hood, the squadron also provides rescue for military personnel at home and abroad.

Rodger Rau, 60, of Cornelius, who spent 22 years as a load master, recalled the happy and sad moments. He talked of the camaraderie and paused before remembering friends lost in the 1996 King 56 plane crash in the Pacific Ocean that claimed the lives of 10 Oregon-based reservists.

"It's still hard for a lot of people," Rau said.

On frequent visits to the base, he and other friends still water a plant owned by Capt. Robert Schott, who died in the crash.

"Last year was the first year it bloomed," since the accident, Rau said smiling.

The day also was emotional for Mark Siegel of Ridgefield, Wash., because the unit meant everything to Siegel's father, an officer and former squadron commander who died in 2002.

"He brought me to work sometimes and I'd get saluted because I was the colonel's kid," Siegel said.

Siegel brought his daughter Erin, 9, and son Joe, 13, to give them a tour and to learn a piece of their family's history.

The Oregon Army National Guard's CH-47 Chinook helicopter and a room full of high-tech gizmos used by the squadron's roughly 50 parajumpers kept kids entertained. Josiah Blanton, a parajumper for seven years, explained sonar equipment and scuba diving gear - worth more than \$150,000 -- that he is trained to operate.

"I don't think they can really grasp everything," Blanton said of his nephews who gawked with wide eyes at the rifles and infrared goggles. "They can touch and feel the equipment and see what we do."

John Crippen, a chaplain for 21 years, will relocate to McChord Air Force Base in Washington as a result of the closure. Crippen, who has presided over base funerals and weddings, said the base feels like family because, "you have a common mission, a common focus protecting people, protecting liberty."

Others already miss the close-knit atmosphere.

"I really miss the people, I miss the flying," Rau, the retiree, said.

Melissa Navas: 503-294-5959; melissanavas@news.oregonian.com