

# Sky command

Four modified 747s have served for nearly four decades as airborne command posts

By Jarrod Bartlett

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For more than 35 years, modified U.S. Air Force Boeing 747s known as the E-4 have been on patrol around the world, providing a secure mobile command post during times of war and national emergencies, but also for diplomatic missions and routine patrols.

“The E-4B must be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at the highest level of readiness,” said Col. Martin Doebel, National Airborne Operations Center commander. “This is a daunting task for military maintainers, airborne communication systems technicians and Boeing’s contractor logistics support personnel. It’s a task that’s been performed without interruption and with outstanding results these past 35 years.”

The first aircraft was delivered to the U.S. Air Force in December 1974 and assumed alert status in early 1975. Three more E-4s followed. In a typical year, the four E-4s will fly more than 50 overseas missions, including stops in more than 25 countries.

Currently, the fourth and final jet is undergoing extensive modifications, including improved video and teleconferencing capabilities, an upgraded conference room, and a digital communications system that will replace an analog one that is destined for a museum. The modifications include about 350 miles (560 kilometers) of new wiring. The other three aircraft have already received the upgrade.

“It’s our job at Boeing to partner with our customer and other teammates on the E-4B team to ensure that when called upon, the E-4B is ready to respond,” said Glenn Winkler, Boeing E-4B program manager. “With only four aircraft in the fleet and one of them undergoing scheduled maintenance at all times, it’s even more important for us to have a customer focus that delivers a capable, ready, reliable aircraft.”

The modified Boeing 747-200s were originally deployed during the Cold War to help counter nuclear threats to fixed,

land-based command centers. Over the past 20 years, the mission has changed in response to emerging defense challenges. Today the E-4B, based at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., serves as the National Airborne Operations Center where strategic decisions are made and communicated in war or during disasters.

“There is an enduring requirement for the president, secretary of defense and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to have assured, continuous and reliable communications among themselves and with U.S. Forces worldwide, and to have immediate access to decision-making information,” Doebel explained. “It’s safe to expect the E-4B will continue providing U.S. leadership a reliable, highly capable, survivable and enduring node of the National Military Command System through the early 2020s.”

The E-4B is one of the most sophisticated communications aircraft in the world. Operating the aircraft are Air Force personnel and an extended maintenance team, who are on

call around-the-clock to keep the planes ready. Boeing’s Global Transport & Executive Systems supports the E-4B with maintenance, modifications and upgrades at the Wichita, Kan., and Oklahoma City facility, and provides field services at Offutt Air Force Base. Global Transport & Executive Systems employees in Wichita also provide Programmed Depot Maintenance on each jet every five years.

“I’m proud to support the E-4B program because of the critical role the aircraft plays in national security,” said Bruce Johnson, a 34-year Boeing employee and team leader on the Wichita flight line. “Providing the best possible maintenance on this aircraft is our way of showing the pride we feel.”

[jarrod.s.bartlett@boeing.com](mailto:jarrod.s.bartlett@boeing.com)

**PHOTOS:** The last of four E-4B aircraft is currently undergoing modifications at Boeing’s Wichita, Kan., facility. JOSH PLUEGER