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Holmes, Batten pay first visit to nuclear treaty monitoring center

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – The commander of Air Combat Command paid his first visit to the Department of Defense’s sole nuclear treaty monitoring center recently to meet the Airmen responsible for providing forensic-level scientific data to support ACC and national decision makers.

Gen. Mike Holmes, accompanied by his command chief, Chief Master Sgt. Frank Batten, flew in to Patrick AFB and spent the day learning more about the organization that falls under their command. Col. Steven M. Gorski, commander of the Air Force Technical Applications Center, Dr. Glenn E. Sjoden, AFTAC chief scientist, and Chief Master Sgt. Michael Joseph, AFTAC’s command chief, accompanied the ACC leadership team throughout the visit to introduce them to the scientists, engineers, analysts, operators and support technicians who execute the AFTAC mission.



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“I was told early in my tenure as COMACC about AFTAC and how I needed to see for myself what this organization was all about,” said Holmes. “It was everything I expected it to be, and more.”

The itinerary took the general and chief on tours of AFTAC’s clean room, its 24/7 operations center, radiochemistry lab, heritage room, help desk, maintenance warehouse, innovation lab and data center. At each location, AFTAC Airmen briefed Holmes and Batten on how they execute the mission of nuclear event detection, technical nuclear forensics, nuclear debris collection and analysis, and countering weapons of mass destruction.

Holmes was particularly interested in seeing AFTAC’s Innovation Lab, which he had heard a lot about before his arrival.

“The Secretary of the Air Force (Heather Wilson) has a keen interest in innovation,” said Holmes. “I was aware of the innovative work being accomplished here at AFTAC, but I didn’t know the exact projects your innovation lab was specifically working on. I did know they were important enough to be showcased at the AFA (Air Force Association) symposium in Orlando, and it was great to be able to see these Airmen in action and the important mission they perform. Very impressive!”

ACC’s senior enlisted leader was equally impressed with the center’s work force.

“The AFTAC Airmen’s innovative spirit and mission focus impressed me,” said Batten. “I enjoyed sharing time with Airmen who were not apprehensive to try something and fail. Mistakes can make us better and teach lessons, and they built upon that to overcome many challenges.”

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He added, “I didn’t realize prior to the visit just what (these Airmen) fully did, and I left just blown away.”

In 2015, AFTAC became a subordinate unit under ACC as one of the command’s premier surveillance organizations under 25th Air Force. While AFTAC personnel have had significant interaction with their counterparts at ACC’s headquarters at Langley AFB, Va., this was the first time Holmes and Batten had the opportunity to visit the nuclear treaty monitoring center since Holmes took command of ACC in 2017.



With the eyes of the world focused on the emerging nuclear threat, the general received briefings on AFTAC’s first-hand role in recent global events, including how scientific data are collected and analyzed, how the information is reported to senior leaders, and how it shapes national policy and international response – all keys to the U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy.

“The world is a different place than it was 25 years ago,” Holmes said. “Our challenges are different – the enemy operates in an asymmetrical fashion and they square off against us in unconventional, irregular ways. That’s why it’s so important for us to operate across our multi-domain platforms within the whole government strategy, which is where AFTAC plays a significant role in what they bring to the fight. You guys are key in that regard.”

After meeting scores of Airmen who call AFTAC home, including three of AFTAC’s overseas detachment chiefs via video teleconference, Batten wasn’t able to meet them all, so he offered a few key pieces of advice for the center’s junior enlisted force.

“While timing and luck play a part in getting through life, I think it’s a pretty easy formula to set yourself up for great opportunities,” he explained. “My three steps are simple: learn your job and do it well; take care of those Airmen entrusted to you; and you won’t always get it right, but try every day to make yourself a little better.”

The command chief has upcoming travel in the near future and hopes to be able to connect with Airmen at AFTAC’s overseas detachments.

“I think getting out to those locations is important, especially to thank these great Airmen for their hard work and dedication to such a vital mission. I look forward to seeing the detachments in these areas.”

The visit also included the opportunity for Holmes to recognize several outstanding performers. Capt. Joshua Ford, Hugh Brown, Senior Airman Andrew Pouncy, Christopher Lockridge, Staff Sgt. BreAnne Groth, and Senior Airman Samuel Carmichael all received coins from Holmes for their hard work.

“It was very satisfying to be acknowledged for the work our whole team has done in standing up the AFTAC mission defense team, which will be part of the larger Air Force transition from a traditional communications squadron construct to the new active cyber defense concept,” said Hugh Brown, AFTAC’s MDT threat emulation lead. “The efforts the ACC/A6 has provided have been invaluable, and they have been pivotal in their help to get us where we need to be. It was an honor to be recognized.”

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Gorski reflected on the importance of their visit.

“This was an outstanding opportunity to showcase the men and women of AFTAC to COMACC and the ACC Command Chief,” said Gorski. “While they knew our mission well, they were able to connect with our folks on a personal level – to see their passion, professionalism and deep expertise first-hand. Gen. Holmes and Chief Batten got a ‘behind-the-scenes’ look at how we produce timely and relevant information for our senior officials as well as to the warfighter, and to personally meet the people who are the backbone of this great organization. It was a pleasure to host them.”

