

'All in this together'

F-16 flyover salutes health care workers

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Col. Akshai Gandhi
S.C. Air National Guard
169th Fighter Wing
commander

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Health care workers and local residents couldn't ask for better weather Monday morning, as two F-16s roared across sunny and clear blue skies overhead to salute those serving on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19.

The South Carolina Air National Guard's 169th

Fighter Wing flew jets over Prisma Health's Oconee Memorial Hospital campus in a display of support for health care workers amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Monday's flyover planned to visit more than 60 medical centers across South Carolina to salute COVID-19 responders was part of the U.S. Air Force's Operation American Resolve. The flyovers were completed in conjunction


with regularly scheduled training exercises and conducted at no additional cost to taxpayers.

"This is our way of saying 'thank you' to the South Carolina heroes who are working on the front lines around the clock taking care of us during the COVID-19 pandemic," Col. Akshai Gandhi, commander of the 169th Fighter Wing, said in a news release.

Seneca Fire Chief Richie Caudill and his department were some of the first to show on Monday morning, flying an American flag from the top of a firetruck ladder bucket. The event provided everyone a "breath of fresh air" outside while social distancing, Caudill said.

"We're all in this together and dealing with it like everybody else is," he said. "We run a lot of calls to the hospital and run them every day. Just the fact the military is

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Onlookers watch as two South Carolina Air National Guard F-16s fly over Oconee Memorial Hospital on Monday morning. The flyover was a show of support for health care workers battling the COVID-19

FLYOVER: 'We've had just incredible support all along'

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flying over, just to show support for them also ... for us to just be able to do something like this for the pilots when they fly over is just kind of cool — to show them we support them, too.”

Others gathered to watch the flyover included Karen White and Kelley LeRoy sitting outside the Rosa Clark Medical Center.

Neither are health care workers, but each said they had someone close to them who was or had been in the industry.

“We just wanted to show our support and watch the flyover,” said White, whose sister is a neonatal nurse practitioner.

Cookie Hyatt said her daughter-in-law told her she was bringing her grandson to watch from the hospital’s parking lot and wanted to tag along.

“Anything positive right now is a good idea, something special to stay positive,” Hyatt said.

Oconee Memorial Hospital chief operating officer Hunter Kome said workers have been

“totally incredible and focused on patients.”

“It’s great to see the support. We’ve had just incredible support all along from the community,” Kome said. “I was working at our emergency department screening site this weekend and had to carry food in repeatedly. People just buying food for the staff and so on. It’s just wonderful to see the support of health care workers in general, not just here in Oconee.”

A group of five women donning purple scrubs and face masks from the hospital’s environmental services division took a quick reprieve from working inside to watch the flyover across the clear blue sky.

“It was really nice,” one woman said.

“We appreciate they allowed us to come out,” another worker said. “It was a really nice break.”

The group of five posed for a quick photo together before heading right back to work.

— Robert Benson contributed to this report.

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