

728th ACS heads to Iraq for 4th time

By Melissa Nelson - The Associated Press

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AP) — The hugs and tearful goodbyes the 728th Air Control Squadron shared Wednesday are part of a routine they know well — the 200-member Air Force unit has served in Iraq three times since 2003.

But familiarity didn't make things easier as the air controllers and others headed out before dawn for a fourth tour.

Senior Airman Ashley Bloom carried her 15-month old daughter on her hip before leaving. Because her husband is also in the Air Force and frequently travels, the baby will stay with her parents in Missouri.

"I'll get through it with lots of pictures, videos of her and e-mails. I'm doing OK now, but I was crying earlier. I told my husband not to call, just to wait because I couldn't handle it," Bloom said.

This deployment was already scheduled before President Bush announced his plan last week to send another 21,500 troops to stabilize sectarian violence in Iraq. Capt. Brooke Brander, an Air Force spokesman, could not say whether the president's plan might cause the 728th's stay to be extended beyond the planned 120 days.

Michael O'Hanlon, a foreign policy analyst at the Brookings Institution, said a typical soldier in a combat brigade deploys about once every three years.

"A fourth deployment is still rare but not totally unusual, especially for certain specialized capabilities and for Marines," he said.

But longer and more frequent deployments will become more common with Bush's plan for troop increases, he said.

The 728th is the among the most-deployed air control squadrons, said Col. Russ Handy, who commands the fighter wing that includes the unit. The squadron's 200 airmen are radar operators and others with high-demand technical expertise.

"[The deployments] are a product of that demand, but, Defense Department-wide, there are others working at least as hard as we are," he said. "They are very highly deployed they have had the quickest turnaround of any of the air control squadrons in the Air Force."

The 728th lost 31-year-old Staff Sgt. Patrick Griffin Jr. in 2003 in Iraq.

The squadron deployed to Baghdad International Airport in 2003 for seven months and controlled air defense systems, they returned in 2005 for five months and again in 2006 for a four-month deployment. It returned home in September after spending time at Kirkuk, Tallil and Balad air bases.

“We are hoping that in the future we will be able to give them more of a rest before they redeploy,” Handy said.

Although morale has remained steady, “We see predictable issues associated with a unit deployed as much as this one,” he said.

“I guess you learn how to deal with it,” said Debbie Trate, whose husband, Master Sgt. Kenneth Trate has been in the Air Force for 20 years. She and her children, ages 11 and 15, watched their husband and father leave.

“We are old hats at it now and the Air Force is good about explaining all of the safety issues to us.”

Sgt. Ryan McMullen, 24, has spent two birthdays in Iraq and will spend his 25th there.

“This is the one that matters because my insurance will go down,” he said. “But it will be just another birthday in the desert.”