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Byline: Mladen Rudman

May 01--EGLIN AFB -- For the third time in about as many years, the 728th Air Control Squadron is on its way to the Middle East.

More than 200 Demons, as 728th ACS airmen are known, plan to deploy this month.

The place they will go to operate a powerful air traffic control and threat detection radar hasn't been released. In 2003, the 728th ACS deployed to Baghdad International Airport for seven months. Less than two years later, Demons went to Balad, Tallil and Kirkuk air bases in Iraq.

An advance team of 12 squadron airmen will head out earlier to pave the way for the unit's next deployment.

Among the dozen is enthusiastic Capt. Michelle Turquette, an air battle manager.

"It's a pretty good feeling to get over there first," she said. The deployment to the Middle East in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom will be Turquette's second with the 728th ACS.

By getting there early with a small contingent, the captain expects to have enough time to acclimate herself, as well as make sure the camp where the rest of the squadron will spend months is ready for Demons.

The advance team will inventory equipment, assess the operations climate and do an assortment of other [jobs](#).

Once that part of her tour is finished, Turquette will manage air traffic. Among her duties will be vectoring warplanes and helicopters on ground attack missions to help soldiers and Marines fighting on the ground.

Turquette had no qualms about heading out. Air control squadron airmen -- their parent unit is the 33rd Fighter Wing -- are part of a much larger contingent of troops from Eglin Air Force Base preparing to deploy over the next couple of months.

Hundreds of airmen from the 96th Air Base Wing and other units will pass through the Eglin Readiness Center on their way overseas.

The 728th ACS is commanded by Lt. Col. Rock Gordon. When the unit deploys, he said it will go as a nearly self-contained fighting force.

The Demons bring security forces, medics and an assortment of maintainers, including HVAC specialists.

"Air conditioners are important over there this time of year," Gordon said. He deployed with the squadron to Iraq in 2003.

There's no doubt Demons will be extremely busy while in the theater.

"It's definitely a 24/7 operation, and people are constantly on the go," Gordon said.

Their jobs come with risks.

The 728th ACS is the only Eglin-based unit to endure the death of one of its own while deployed as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Staff Sgt. Patrick L. Griffin, a data systems technician, died May 13, 2003, during a rest stop near Ad Diwaniyah, Iraq. An investigation concluded an unexploded American bomblet dispersed by an artillery rocket was accidentally triggered, its projectile skewering Griffin.

That deployment also eventually led to the conviction of a 728th ACS major for smuggling guns into the United States.

Along with the tragic or criminal happenings during its seven-month-stay in Iraq, the squadron also played an important hand in something vital.

Squadron air managers directed the helicopter attack in July 2003 that's credited with killing Saddam Hussein's sons, Odai and Qusai.

The squadron's subsequent deployment in 2005 was by the book. It expects the same from the upcoming tour.

Chief Master Sgt. Barbara Cannady, 728th ACS operations superintendent, said troops have been working hard to get ready for the Middle East.

"I feel like we're ready," she said. "I mean, it's going to be a challenge ... (but) we're ready."

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