

## High-Tech Iraq War Run From Iowa

By Bruce Rolfsen, Times staff writer

Airmen at Fort Dodge, Iowa, are developing the next generation of command-and-control hub called the Battle Control Center. And instead of running simulations or working only with aircraft flying over the United States, they're using the greatest proving grounds of all — the air space over Iraq.

The Battle Control Center team has hooked up with the 728th Air Control Squadron at Baghdad International Airport. Together, the units are demonstrating how airmen anywhere in the world can be in direct communication with aircrews over Iraq, and see the same radar picture that is available to the Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.

The direct communication and radar links had their public debut in August at the Air Force's Command and Control Conference held in Danvers, Mass. There were plenty of competing displays, but only the Battle Control Center-Experiment exhibition let interested people talk with an aircrew and see live radar pictures from Iraq or the United States.

The Iowa Air National Guard's 133rd Air Control Squadron at Fort Dodge is overseeing development of the Battle Control Center. The squadron answers to the Command and Control Training and Innovation Group, part of the service's Air Warfare Center.

The 133rd ACS's commander, Lt. Col. Richard Breitbach, said some people are surprised that a Guard unit deep in Iowa farm country is responsible for the high-tech project. But the Guard unit brings to the table a cadre of airmen who are experienced in command-and-control operations, as well as airmen with technical and computer skills. Because the Guard squadron has less turnover than an active-duty counterpart, there is a deep unit memory of how projects have progressed from the ideas to gear in the field.

The Battle Control Center is expected eventually to replace the gear now used by air control squadrons, Breitbach said.

The centers, old and new, function much like an E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System, but on the ground. Controllers and weapons directors have a bird's eye radar view of the region's air traffic and coordinate tanker and combat missions at the tactical level.

The Battle Control Center is based on Internet technologies that allow airmen at any console to share information with each other, Breitbach said. It isn't so easy to bridge the gaps with the old systems now in use, though.

The communications links between Iraq and the United States were done with two dedicated telephone lines, said Maj. Robin Hosch, a 133rd ACS member who deployed with the 728th ACS to Baghdad. Conversations were clear enough that aircrews wouldn't have known they were talking with people in the United States unless they had been told, Hosch said.

Breitbach said he doesn't expect controllers in the United States to handle real-world overseas combat missions. However, the center will allow controllers to be further removed from the combat zone.

For example, the 728th ACS's controllers are based at Baghdad International Airport. The new center could allow them to be deployed to less-vulnerable location such as Qatar, he said.