

Airmen keep Iraqi airways clear

by Staff Sgt. Lindsey Maurice  
332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

3/16/2005 - **BALAD AIR BASE, Iraq (AFP)** -- As 1st Lt. Damian Wanliss enters his cold, dark office, dimly lit by the green glare of the screen ahead, he takes a deep breath and anticipates another day of directing traffic in the chaotic Iraqi sky.

The lieutenant, a 727th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron weapons control officer, is just one of about 170 Airmen supporting the unit's mission of providing command and control of joint air operations through surveillance, identification, weapons control, theater missile defense, battle management and theater [communications](#) links.

The unit is run by Airmen of the 728th ACS from Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. As one of only five units of its kind in the active-duty Air Force, the squadron is a completely self-contained, [mobile](#) combat unit, officials said.

The Airmen are "excited to be here during such a historic period," said Lt. Col. Scot Shively, 727th EACS commander. This is the unit's second tour supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Airmen of the 728th ACS are from 27 different Air Force specialties including operations, radar, aerospace ground equipment, maintenance, technical control, ground radio, intelligence, mission planning and communications. Each specialty works closely together to accomplish the mission, Colonel Shively said.

The operations Airmen start their day with the help of two massive radar antennae, towering about 25-feet above opposite ends of the base. The equipment, maintained by the 727th EACS radar shop Airmen, provide operators with an accurate [picture](#) of air traffic flow throughout the day.

"It's our radar (systems) that allow the operators to do their mission," said Senior Airman Ronald Adair, a 727th EACS ground radar systems journeyman. "They are our eyes in the sky."

With between 40 and 80 aircraft flying in the Iraqi airspace within a 12-hour period, the jobs of the surveillance technicians and weapons controllers can get hectic, said Tech. Sgt. Harold Austin, a 727th EACS air surveillance technician.

The surveillance technicians make sure the air picture is accurate and all assets in the sky are identified. From there, it is up to the weapons controllers to keep the aircraft on course, make sure they don't cross paths, direct refueling support, direct aircraft for ground support and coordinate with civilian flight agencies.

Surveillance technicians and weapons controllers identify or direct air assets for two

hours at a time, six hours a day at one of four consoles in an operations module, a dark 15-by-8-foot box kept near 55 degrees. The Airmen deal with about 300 percent more aircraft activity here than at home station, Sergeant Austin said.

"It can get pretty crazy in there at times," Lieutenant Wanliss said, "definitely more intense than we could ever prepare for back at home station. But it's a very rewarding job -- one to be proud of."

The controllers said their jobs, however, would not be possible without the maintainers. Split into 10 major sections with a total of 110 Airmen, the unit's maintenance mission is varied and complex, said Capt. Robert Barry, 727th EACS chief of maintenance.

"I've never been in charge of such a diverse maintenance team before," he said. "They really keep our mission going, from maintaining our vehicle fleet and [communication](#) systems to keeping the entire unit powered. I'd have to say they are the hardest working bunch of (Airman) I've ever worked with."

The maintenance Airmen maintain more than \$80 million worth of equipment, including a fleet of 79 vehicles, radar equipment, operations modules, tactical generators, environmental control units, [computers](#) and a wide array of communications equipment.

The squadron's digital systems maintenance shop Airmen maintain about \$35 million worth of equipment, including four tactical air operations modules. With 18 maintainers in the grade of airman first class in the 24 person shop, the team is unusually young, said Tech. Sgt. Kellis Leon-Guerrero, noncommissioned officer in charge of digital maintenance, but they excel at their work.

"The young troops in my shop are some of the hardest working Airmen I have ever worked with," Sergeant Leon-Guerrero said. "Considering the complexity, diversity and importance of the systems they maintain, these young Airmen have demonstrated they have what it takes."

With about half of their deployment remaining, the Airmen of the 727th EACS said they remain focused on the task at hand, but they long for the warm, bright, Florida paradise awaiting them back home.