

'Demons' return from deployment, reunite with 'angels'

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5/24/2007 - **EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.** --
The "Demons" have made their way home to hail their "angels."

Family members gathered in front of the squadron as more than 175 members of the 728th Air Control Squadron, the Demons, returned home May 24 from a deployment to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

They arrived by plane on Eglin's runway and were carried by bus to their anxiously awaiting families.

As the buses turned the corner and came into view, the crowd erupted in cheers. Red, white and blue banners, balloons and handcrafted signs waved in the Florida breeze. Giggling laughs, smiling faces and teary eyes greeted the convoy of Airmen ready to end their journey from another deployment in Iraq.

They made it home...again.

"I can't describe the feeling," said Lt. Col. Frederick DeFranza, 728th ACS commander. "It's one of jubilation.

"After spending (such a long time) in combat conditions and then coming home to a welcome back like this only amplifies the feelings," the commander said.

Tech. Sgt. Eric Yingling, assistant noncommissioned officer in charge of network communications, was one of many who sat impatiently the entire trip home trying not to anticipate the reaction of seeing his family again at Eglin.

"I tried not to think about it and relax a little," he said about his third return home from Iraq. "As soon as the plane hit the ground, I had a lump in my throat and butterflies in my stomach."



EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. --
Jeni Zayas, wife of Master Sgt. Roberto Zayas, 728th Air Control Squadron, spends a few longed-for moments with her husband shortly after he arrived home May 24 from his deployment to Southwest Asia. Family members gathered in front of the squadron as more than 175 members of the 728th ACS, the Demons, returned home from a deployment to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 728th ACS mission encompasses the widest variety of Air Force careers, affording it global reach and the ability to complete its mission anywhere needed. The Airmen spent the last five months in Iraq controlling and monitoring Iraqi airspace, assisting in providing close air support for troops in conflict and reconnaissance and directing tanker traffic for refueling efforts. The squadron has spent nine of the past 12 months deployed. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Mike Meares)

After fighting back tears while holding on to his three daughters in a group bear hug, he said to his children, "This is what it's all about. It's rough being away from you girls, but it's for a good cause."

"Being home is what reinforces why we do what we do," he said. "We serve so (the next) generation can grow up in a free country and have those freedoms guaranteed."

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During this deployment, the 728th ACS controlled 26,828 combat sorties, the highest total of any Air Expeditionary Force rotation since the outset of OIF. They also provided 36,626 man hours on the radar scope and 633 troops-in-contact support; which increased from 279 during the 2006 deployment.

The base survived 169 attacks during their recent tenure as well, but getting home was the most recent mission for the Airman of the 728th ACS.

"It seems like an endless day getting home," said Capt. Cedric Weatherly, 728th ACS network systems flight commander, who was deployed with the squadron in 2006. "It's stressful, exciting; a lot of emotions in a short period of time. When you're traveling halfway across the world, you're not going to make any milestones in terms of time. You will get there in due time."

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For loved ones, the Airmen's return couldn't come soon enough.

"It's hard when I don't have him for even a week," said Jeni Zayas, about her husband Master Sgt. Roberto Zayas. "It's been really hard not being able to talk to him every day and being alone and at home with the kids. I don't share him much for the first couple of weeks."

The unit will return to their deployed location in the near future, but for now, the angels at home who kept them going during their deployments are in need of some well deserved attention.