

Deployed Airmen Keep Planes, Spirits Flying High

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (ACCNS) -- Eglin airmen are working at Baghdad International Airport, wearing various hats to keep the airplanes in the air and airmen on the ground safe.

Airmen from the 728th Air Control Squadron deployed from Eglin more than three months ago and have had to learn to deal with the danger and the boredom that accompany a deployment to Iraq.

“The mission here is a perfect match for our training and experience with command and control,” said Senior Airman Wylee Smith, a 728th ACS weapons director. “Operationally, the mission is more robust than anything we have accomplished in years.”

Airman Smith said the surveillance technicians track hundreds of aircraft that travel through Iraqi airspace 24 hours a day. The weapons controllers also control close air support, air refueling, humanitarian, combat search and rescue, and airlift missions. Every day, they enforce restricted operation zones and temporary flight restrictions.

Working 24 hours a day can take a toll on the troops, but they are able to keep the clock on their deployment moving during their down time to ward off boredom, said Staff Sgt. Narto Simmons, 728th ground radar systems craftsman. Since there’s no off-base travel because of security issues, they find on-base activities to keep them busy.

“Many airmen play available sports such as basketball and volleyball,” he said. “There’s a lot of reading and watching movies. Troops do whatever to pass the time because the days are long.”

“We built a separate room next door to our work tent,” said Tech. Sgt. Mark Moore, the noncommissioned officer in charge of 728th ACS system control. “There we play video games and watch DVD movies. We call it the ‘Nebuchanezzar.’” He said it was named after the hovercraft used in the movie “Matrix” to transport the main character, Neo, and others to and from the Matrix.

“It’s our way of transporting out of the war in Iraq,” he said.

Even though each airman has his or her own way of stepping out of the war, the reality of where they are is ever-present in their minds.

“This is for real out here,” said Airman 1st Class Joshua Tyrie, a 728th satellite and

wideband communication systems apprentice. “This isn’t like when it’s on the news and it’s somewhere else or someone else. We are here, and it’s all around us.”

Airman Tyrie said he tries not to dwell on what’s going on there, but at night when he hears the gunfire the explosions, he knows what’s happening.

With that in mind, their main concern is safety. They receive an intelligence briefing daily, and the unit gives reports and provides information on how to better protect themselves.



728th Air Control Squadron members salute during the flag raising near the TPS-75 radar on site at Baghdad International Airport. The squadron has been deployed since April, tracking hundreds of aircraft that travel through Iraqi airspace 24 hours a day. They also control close air support, air refueling, humanitarian, combat search and rescue, and airlift missions. They enforce restricted operation zones and temporary flight restrictions every day. (Courtesy photo)

“During the briefing, we are told of all threats to the base,” said Senior Airman Jennifer Knight, a surveillance technician, “and we take steps to ensure our safety.”

While Camp Griffin, the Air Force village at the airport, has not come under direct attack, many areas around it have.

“There is a constant sense of urgency in fortification and concern for physical protection here,” said 1st Lt. Nelson Rouleau, the 728th chief of plans and exercises.

Members of the U.S. Army are there with them and are well equipped to support the base defenses 24 hours a day, providing a sense of security that gives the airmen a chance to look around the area, he said.

“This part of Iraq’s environment is surprisingly green,” said Airman 1st Class Eric

Larsen, 728th surveillance technician, “With the dust in the air, we have some unbelievable sunsets. In fact, it’s not uncommon at all to see many airmen snapping pictures of the sunsets and sunrises at dawn and dusk.”

But it is a desert, a hot desert, said Staff Sgt. Chris Schoen, a 728th ground radar systems craftsman.

“The environment in Baghdad is very rough,” he said. “During the day, temperatures approach 120 degrees. Water is a must for everyone.”

He said cold water is a bonus, as is anything that can be put in the water to add flavor.

“When I get home, I will never pass up a water fountain again,” he said.