

# TRAINING AND EDUCATION

## Air traffic controllers manage skies over Iraq

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332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

BALAD Air Base, Iraq — Helping to orchestrate the air power symphony over Iraq are the Airmen of the 727th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron. Known as Kingpin, they turn non-stop air operations into a ground forces' favorite tune — the sound of jets prowling the sky overhead.

Currently manned by the Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., 728th ACS, the 727th EACS is responsible for controlling all aircraft operating inside Iraq's 277,000 square miles of airspace.

During its previous deployment to Balad from May to September 2006, the unit surveyed, identified and controlled more than 166,000 aircraft.

### Sky insurance

"Our 200 Airmen keep all airborne assets arranged and under control so ground forces get the air support they need," said Lt. Col. Frederick DeFranza, 727th EACS commander. "A pilot is concerned about one mission. My Airmen are concerned about every mission, so troops on the ground never have to wonder if their insurance policy in the sky is good."

The heart of Kingpin's operations lies in several mobile operation modules, conex-shaped trailers stuffed with an array of computers and communication equipment chilled to 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

Inside each 'box,' enlisted surveillance and weapons directors and air weapons officers chatter away in a language foreign to the untrained ear, simultaneously directing roughly 40 separate aircraft to multiple headings, altitudes and locations with the eventual goal of providing air support to ground forces.

### Kill boxes

"Thud 35 — approved 88 Alpha Sierra 12 to 15,000 — traffic stacked below you — surface to 10,000 — traffic stacked above 16 to 22,000 — elevator into your blocks and push tactical," rattles off Senior Airman Andrew Labadie, enlisted weapons director.

To bring a semblance of order to the myriad of aircraft over Iraq, the ACS divides the country's airspace into 'kill boxes,' referred to as the common grid reference system. As aircraft launch and exit a ring of airspace surrounding military airfields, they're passed from the military air traffic controllers in the airfield tower



Photo by Maj. Damien Pickart

Senior Airmen Amanda Hoffman and Rebekka Baker conduct an operational check of a AN/TPS-75 radar system March 9 at Balad AB. They're assigned to the 727th EACS and are deployed from the 728th ACS at Eglin.

and the combined enroute radar approach control into the hands of Kingpin's controllers.

As new blips appear on dimly illuminated scopes, Kingpin assigns each to a block of airspace to conduct missions such as surveillance or close air support. Other aircraft are shuffled to mate up with tankers or committed to support time-sensitive missions such as troops in contact with enemy forces.

Eyes dart from the scopes to a separate terminal that displays a classified version of a chat room. Snippets of information pop up as a joint terminal air controller embedded with ground forces punches in a request for airpower and supporting organizations confirm and contribute other critical data.

Kingpin controllers scan the air tasking order, cross reference the radar scopes, and determine the weapon configuration and fuel load of the nearest available aircraft. Within seconds, they've cleared the airspace and determined the ideal aircraft to assign to the unfolding drama on the ground.

"We're continuously developing a three-dimensional, real-time picture of the battlespace," said Capt. Stefanie Emery. "Our Airmen build the safety net in the sky that pilots, aircrew and ground forces depend on. It's an incredible team effort."

"It gets a little hairy sometimes, but it's nothing the four of us can't handle," said Airman Labadie.

"Working together in close quarters every day, it sometimes seems as if we can accurately anticipate what we're all going to think and do as a particular situation arises."

The Airmen's faces reflected in the scopes display a calm demeanor in spite of the intense tempo. Their cool judgment and quick decisions are the result of the thorough training that precedes every deployment. It also helps that 45 percent of Kingpin's current Airmen were here only four months ago.

"Many of us just left in September, so the tempo is still fresh," said Senior Master Sgt. Scott Delveau, 727th EACS first sergeant. "It's made a difference in how seamlessly we picked up the baton Mountain Home's 726th ACS handed to us."

With 27 different Air Force specialties, an EACS includes operations, security forces, medics, intelligence, services, supply, satellite communications and an array of maintainers including vehicle, radio, radar, communications, aerospace ground equipment and heating, ventilation and air conditioning, to name a few.

"Our unique composition and mobile nature allows us to pack up and deploy to austere locations," said Maj. Cooper Bowden, maintenance chief. "The ingenuity and diverse skills of our maintainers and support personnel are the driving force that keeps Kingpin moving."

### Air traffic controllers get start at Keesler

For more than 50 years, all Air Force air traffic controllers have begun their training at Keesler.

"During the last fiscal year, we graduated 442 students from the radar course, tower course and combat controllers," said Master Sgt. Ed Curley, air traffic control radar course supervisor in the 334th Training Squadron.

A stroll through the compound reveals Airmen changing Humvee brakes, conducting communication component operational checks, diagnosing ailments in the clinic and enjoying the unit's fitness and recreation centers. These amenities support the Airmen whose job responsibilities often require them to be on a short tether if their skills are needed.

"As important as it is for our controllers to direct aircraft in the skies, it's equally important to the Kingpin mission for an HVAC maintainer to repair an air conditioning system that keeps the controller's equipment operating properly," said Tech. Sgt. Josh Phillips. He's deployed with the 728th ACS for all four of its deployments since 2003.

### Unique requirements

"We have some unique power and voltage requirements," he pointed out. "We might operate outside the box, but the Airmen maintaining our generators and cooling units know how critical they are to keeping those boxes humming. If we didn't do our job, our controllers couldn't do theirs and same for the operators in the sky. The food chain starts with these maintainers and we're proud of what we bring to the fight."

Kingpin's current occupants are looking to improve overall communications and situational awareness of the battlespace with a new battle command and control center that opens in November.

"We know we'll be proudly sporting the Kingpin call sign in eight months, so we're starting the improvements now to reap the benefits when we return," Colonel DeFranza said. "Between the contributions of Mountain Home, Eglin and the 729th ACS from Hill AFB, Utah, Kingpin and its mission are a work in progress each of us leaves a little better off than we inherited it."