

Airmen not alone; Covering reachback; Avoiding the steamroller; Continued evolution

THIN BLUE LINE

There are hundreds of airmen assigned to individual augmentee billets or to joint expeditionary taskings in the Central Command area of operations.

Lt. Col. Sang Kim's job is to take care of them.

Kim, commander of the 387th Air Expeditionary Squadron, said he and his staff are the "Air Force blue line" for about 300 airmen with more than 60 Air Force specialties, scattered throughout about 10 countries.

The squadron "oversees those airmen, to make sure they're taken care of, that they have the right training, the right gear, that they're not alone," said Col. Charles D. Bolton, commander of the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing.

That assistance comes in the form of administrative support and other organize, train, and equip functions, Kim said. The staff also makes sure the airmen are being used properly in their jobs, and if there's a problem, they will engage with the airmen's leadership on his or her behalf.

"Some airmen are kind of by themselves at certain locations," Kim said, so if the unit didn't exist, those airmen wouldn't have anyone to reach back to if, for example, they need a cold-weather jacket or legal help.

"That's where we come in and help them out," Kim said.

At one point during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, there were 2,000 to 3,000 JET (joint expeditionary tasked) and individual augmentee (IA) airmen deployed and "all sorts of issues" associated with that, Kim said.



TSgt. Ronald Gowen, a logistician assigned to the 387th Air Expeditionary Squadron, helps unload a C-17 in Southwest Asia.

"That's why the AES [air expeditionary squadron] construct started to grow, to have that blue line connection with our JET and IAs, to make sure that they're being taken care of and not just being steamrolled in any way," Kim said. "There's a lot of behind-the-scenes things that our guys do to take care of our JET and IAs.

USAF photo by SrA. Zachary Kee



First responders with the 386th Expeditionary Civil Engineer Squadron perform medical evacuation training.

YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY

Bolton said the Air Force has "come a long way to get our arms around taking care of them."

For example, if an airman from Little Rock AFB, Ark., embeds with an Army unit in Irbil, Iraq, he or she could be the only airman there, said Bolton. "So who does that person have helping them, supporting them? We do that," he said.

The JET and IA airmen could be tactical air control party personnel, security forces, intelligence, pilots, logistics, or any other specialty the joint staff or other service unit needs. Frequently, Kim said, an Army or Marine ground unit or joint staff unit will be looking for "the airpower mentality that obviously the Air Force brings," and requesting an airman is like hitting "the easy button."

Since the airmen are spread out over a large geographic area, maintaining 100 percent accountability can be a challenge, Kim said. Some may be in a different location than they had originally deployed to, and the numbers in the region change every day.

But, Bolton said, the squadron does a great job of "taking care of all those airmen," making sure they get the mail, that they have someone to talk to if they have a legal concern, or just "to make sure the Air Force family is still with them."

The overall JET and IA mission "continues to evolve," Kim said, and while there are about 300 in his squadron now, the battle to reclaim Mosul, Iraq, has increased their numbers.

"The requirement is steadily increasing, so likewise, our squadron grows with that requirement," he said. ✪

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