

TRAPCON



Controlling the board

by Senior Airman James Croxon
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Working transportable radar approach control at Balad Air Base, Iraq, is like a world-class chess tournament, but instead of 32 pieces on an eight-by-eight board, there are hundreds, and instead of veterans with years of experience, Airmen averaging less than four years in service are controlling the pieces.

The TRAPCON Airmen here control the air space in central Iraq, including Baghdad, according to Tech. Sgt. Gerald Joins, crew senior watch supervisor. "It's basically the air space left over after the northern and southern no-fly zone," he said.

Unlike home station, the Airmen behind the scopes have to learn new tasks due to the unique dynamics of Iraq.

"We train Airmen in a (Federal Aviation Administration) environment back home; it's very static and controlled," said Chief Master Sgt. Hank Gillen, TRAPCON superintendent. "Here it's much more chaotic and dynamic.

"Unlike the special use air space we send the aircraft to at home, the whole country is special use and blocks of air space become restricted for missions with little notice. The controllers have to remain flexible enough to accommodate that at any time," the chief said.

Like master chess players



Photo by Senior Airman James Croxon

who stay many moves ahead of their opponents, the Airmen stay ahead of the aircraft they control and constantly look for ways to stay flexible.

"Back home we have an A-plan and a B-plan," said Senior Airman Ben Omara, deployed from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. "Here we have five or six plans just in case air space is activated for a combat mission or to support ground troops, and it often is."

It's not just the quantity of aircraft that makes the job challenging. The Airmen must track the size, shape, speed and even nationality of the "pieces" they control.

"I'm used to one size of aircraft back home and the occasional civilian jet," said Senior Airman Shantell Ward,

deployed from Laughlin AFB, Texas and who received her 5-skill level certification in February. "Here I have to know if I'm dealing with a (MQ-1) Predator traveling at 60 knots, a C-17 traveling at 250 knots or an F-16 cruising at 450 knots. The F-16 turns on a dime but the Predator can stay airborne all day. I'm constantly prioritizing the aircraft based on need and position."

In addition to communicating with U.S. military aircraft conducting missions, the controllers also communicate with other pilots, including Iraqis.

"The language barrier is probably the hardest thing to get used to," said Senior Airman Clarin Cabana, a Riverdale, Ga. Native, who is deployed from Dover AFB, N.J.

Senior Airman Ben Omara tracks aircraft on his scope. Transportable radar approach control Airmen like him monitor all aircraft, military or civilian, in central Iraq. By the time their Air Expeditionary Force rotation is over, they will have controlled more than 95,000 missions.

The amount of trust and responsibility assigned to these Airmen is tremendous, since losing a match would result in mission failure. It's the flexibility inherent in the career field that allows Airmen in their 20s or even younger to do a job that is so demanding.

"These Airmen amaze me everyday," said Staff Sgt. Brandi Cannedy, deployed from Grand Forks AFB, N.D. "I don't remember having anywhere near this much responsibility when I was an Airman. It's a steep learning curve when they get here, steeper than technical school or on-the-job training and they accept the challenges and meet them."

Here in Iraq, the tournament never ends; there are always new pieces to move.