

"The Bats"



Keep Troops Safe Daily

Staff Sgt. Ryan Hansen
386th AEW/PA

Their mission statement is simple – save the lives of troops on the ground in Iraq by providing an electronic shield around them.

That's the job of the 43d Expeditionary Electronic Communications Squadron in a nutshell. Everyday of the week the Bats, as they are known, take to the air to actively support coalition warfighters in harm's way by providing electronic combat coverage.

As one of only two electronic communications squadrons in the Air Force, the 43d EECS' special skills are in high demand. They, along with their sister squadron, the 41st EECS, are part of the 55th Electronic Combat Group at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., and have been continuously deployed to the AOR since Spring 2004.

"I'm incredibly proud of everybody here with us," said Lt. Col. Steve

Miller, 43d EECS commander. "We have guys that have been deployed here four and five times now and their dedication to the mission is just amazing to me."

While the 41st EECS is responsible for Operation Enduring Freedom, the 43d EECS takes care of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"We work with three major divisions on the ground: the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and the Army's 101st Airborne and 4th Infantry Division," Colonel Miller said.

A typical mission for the 43d EECS consists of eight-to-nine hours of flying high above the Iraqi sky. While in the air they respond to joint tactical air strike requests, which basically tell the Bats where their help is needed.

"Through JTASRs they tell us where, when and what they need to have targeted," Colonel Miller said.

And the numbers don't lie. So far this year the 43d EECS has supported more than 1,125 JTASRs and last year

they answered more than 1,500 requests.

"It's known as electronic close air support or non-kinetic CAS," said Maj. Arvid Opry, 43d EECS director of operations. "Basically we are providing a protective shield for 150,000 ground troops and Iraqi civilians."

Although the requests are large, the number of personnel and aircraft in the squadron is relatively small. The 43d EECS maintains a high mission effectiveness rate by relying on roughly 35 operations personnel and about 35 maintenance troops, who are from the Red Aircraft Maintenance Unit of the 386th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron.

"The mission we do here is really motivational," said Capt. Joe Schmidt, OIC of Red AMU. "We have a lot of guys that are here for their third or fourth time and even with that much time away from their families, they still love to come over here and do this."



Tech. Sgt. Phillip Patterson, a mission crew supervisor with the 43d Expeditionary Electronic Communications Squadron, prepares his station for a mission into Iraq recently.

The 43d EECS operates a fleet of EC-130H *Compass Calls* to accomplish their important mission. At first glance these aircraft appear to be the same as the rest of the Rock's C-130, however they are not. The crew on board uses this heavily modified airframe to disrupt enemy command and control communications.

"The antennas really stand out, especially the one they call the cheese cutter," Colonel Miller said. "Basically from nose to tail we have receiver antennas and jamming antennas that help us do our mission."

Through all the deployments and long work hours, including more than 320 sorties this year including more than 2,600 combat flying hours, it's supporting the forward deployed troops that keep Airmen of the 43d EECS motivated to get the mission done.

"The biggest thing for me is the team



(Top) Capt. Matthew Butterworth, a co-pilot with the 43d EECS, talks to the command post before taxiing onto the runway. (Above) 1st Lt. Josh Coakley, a mission crew commander with the 43d EECS, checks his equipment before takeoff.

effort I see out here," Captain Schmidt said. "We've got guys who normally work in the back that wouldn't have anything to do with us, but here they want to step in and help where they can."

"When people come to the squadron they're aware of our ops tempo," Major Opry said. "And at the three year point they can shift out, but most of them stick with it."

To me that really shows the dedication they have to the mission and the squadron."



Second Bat Hits 1,000 Hours

In the aircrew world what was once almost unheard of is now becoming more common.

On Aug. 2, Master Sgt. Tony Roy, a flight engineer with the 43d Expeditionary Electronics Communications Squadron, surpassed 1,000 combat flying hours.

While just a few years ago this would have been an absolutely incredible feat, the number may soon become a regular event with the continuous deployments of the Bats.



Roy

Sergeant Roy is the second member of the 43d EECS to earn a 1,000 hour patch following Tech. Sgt. Russell Olekshuk, an electronic intelligence operations specialist, who hit the mark back in April.

However, just because we're starting to see it more often, does not mean the feat is not significant.

"It's still amazing and it shouldn't be overlooked," said Lt. Col. Steve Miller, 43d EECS commander. "These guys are real high timers and their dedication is impressive."

Sergeant Roy is on his fourth deployment to the AOR with the Bats. And although it would be very easy to be fed up with the time away from his family, he actually says he enjoys the challenges and loves the mission.

"I almost feel like I'm at home here," he said. "The importance of the mission really keeps us all going."

Sergeant Roy is a 17 year veteran of the Air Force. He said it's because of these constant deployments he feels a teamwork with the Bats that he has not felt anywhere else in his career.

"We're a little different than the other side of the (operations) house. We're constantly deployed together, we all know each other, so there's really no learning curve at all."

While Sergeant Roy is just the second member of the 43d EECS to hit the 1,000 combat flying hour mark, there are at a few more who will be hitting it soon.

"It's going to become commonplace for our guys," Colonel Miller said. "We've bought a bunch of patches because we know a lot of people are going to do it."