

AEF Cycle lengthens to six or more months for some at Robins

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For certain Air Force specialties changes in the Air Expeditionary Force Cycle are making Air Force deployments size up with those of other service branches.

More than 40 percent of tour lengths for the Air Force now exceed the established four-month rotation.

And while some Airmen's tours have just recently bumped up to six- and eight-month stints, Capt. John Robinson, readiness flight chief in the 78th Logistics Readiness Squadron, said it has been a way of life for his Airmen for the last three years.

"The typical deployment that we were looking at was a four-month window – basically being deployed for 120 days," he said. "But due to the fact that the Army was running out of units to fill their deployable taskings, the Air Force has picked up (in lieu of) taskings. So, basically more and more of our career fields are going down six month paths."

Currently, 75 percent of 78th LRS deployments are six



U.S. Air Force file photo by SUE SAPP

19th Air Refueling Group members ask Tech. Sgt. Michael Murdock financial questions as they go through deployment processing Jan. 26.

months or longer, with only 25 percent remaining on the four-month deployment, the captain said.

Capt. Robinson said the longer deployments don't factor in the two to 12 weeks en route training typically done at Army posts before Air Force members deploy.

The captain said another change came for his Airmen in the way of mobility bags and how Airmen are equipped to do their mission.

Instead of getting mobility bags at home stations, Airmen are now issued the bags at one of three distribution centers throughout the Central Command and receive necessary armor in theater. Captain Robinson said the change is saving the service about \$200 to \$300 per person.

Airmen in the security forces and civil engineering career fields across the Air Force are accustomed to the deployment practices.

Tech. Sgt. Randall Burton, unit deployment manager in the 78th Security Forces Squadron, said the 180-day tours are routine for his squadron.

Sergeant Burton said his squadron deploys Airmen in two six-month bundles.

"Our security forces members are very resilient," he said. "They are working hard. They go and do their time; and surprisingly enough, we get a lot of new troops that volunteer to go again six months later."

Maj. Greg Anderson, 78th SFS commander, said his Airmen have rotated in six-month deployments since September 11, 2001, with certain assets like military working dog handlers remaining in greater demand than traditional security forces roles.

"As a leader, I think that we're going to do the best job we can to provide a stable and predictable schedule for our Airmen," he said. "We know they're going to deploy. We know the deployments probably won't decrease any time in the near future. So we're going to do what we can in order to provide

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some stability for our young Airmen and NCOs so they know what to expect and they can plan accordingly — professionally and personally.”

As the mission evolves, Captain Robinson said the AEF rotation cycle must roll with the changes.

“The changes are coming about for two reasons,” he said. “One, it provides better continuity for combat commanders overseas. Two, you go for a longer period of time, but you’re getting tagged less times. They generally have six to eight months before they’re up for deployment again.”

Master Sgt. Kim Harper, 78th LRS vehicle operations superintendent, said the new system offers benefits full circle.

“Under the old system, we were going more frequently,” he said. “We’d get back from a deployment and turn around and you’d be gone again in four or five months. With the new AEF deployments, you get more time back at your home station with your family and your friends and

so forth. It allows you to prepare for promotional tests and things like that. It also makes it easier for superintendents to manage AEF buckets and gives Airmen time to heal before they have to go again.”

Although there are benefits, the lengthened deployment time isn’t without problems. Captain Robinson said as a result, most shops affected by the changes never have a full staff and 1st Lt. Alan Tally, Installation Deployment officer in the 78th LRS’s Readiness Flight, said changes in the AEF rotation may cause hardship for Airmen left behind.

“The members who have stayed back to do the daily job are having to put in longer hours

because now their shop has been decreased by a number of manning personnel,” he said. “So the shop has to step up and put in longer hours, maybe come in and work a different stand-by shift.”

Sergeant Harper said leaders have come to understand there will be some reduction in services available at the home station and are sensitive to an Airman’s need for recuperation and time for reintegration with families after deployments.

Captain Robinson said squadron reintegration briefings, which allow helping agencies to meet with returning Airmen and their families to offer assistance in the homecoming process, will increase as more troops head out and head home.