

KEEPING COMM OPEN

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Public Affairs

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan
— Deployed units rely on a steady flow of communication to accomplish the mission — computers and phones provide vital links between organizations around the Air Force.

Equally important is making sure that those computers and phones work well — especially in an environment that is not conducive to electronics.

Keeping the communication network running for 600 Airmen deployed to Bagram Air Base falls to the communications flight team. “We support the computer network, phones

Staff Sgt. John Baker, 455th ESS, uses a can of compressed air to blow dust out of a computer. Dust is a constant foe of communications experts at Bagram, because it quickly destroys computer equipment.

and lines,” said Master Sgt. Robert Dempsey, 455th Expeditionary Support Squadron.

“After nearly three years of deployed operations, much of the equipment on base is the same as on a traditional base. For the most part, the entire infrastructure is fiber (optic cable) or Cat-5 (computer network cable). There is some tactical equipment, but another organization maintains it.” Tactical communications equipment is usually used in the first networks built in a deployed theater, providing basic communications capabilities.

The job here is different from what some communications Airmen are used to, said Sergeant Dempsey, mostly because the Army forces here provide and maintain the infrastructure. “Normally, we run everything on an installation — we are the communications experts setting up and maintaining the network. Here, we are responsible for the computers on Camp Cunningham. If the server goes down at home, my team is responsible for fixing it. Here, the Army has that responsibility.”

Working at the user level instead of the network level helps communications experts better understand their cus-

tomers. “I usually work with people who have the same level of expertise that I do,” said Staff Sgt. John Baker, 455th ESS. “Here, I work with people with differing levels — some know nothing and others know just enough to be dangerous.”

Working here gives him a lot of information on how to improve training, both for users and for those who provide customer service for those users. “Now I can train work group managers better on dealing with customers — I can provide them more specific knowledge. Comm Airmen spend most of their time repairing and maintaining the equipment here. For computers, that’s a responsibility that normally falls to work group managers, such as Airman 1st Class Demetrill Newman, an information manager. “I mostly work on uncovering software issues and doing some repairs. That’s something I don’t do at home.”

Another task Airman Newman didn’t have the opportunity to do at home was to deal with classified systems.

The opportunities here have given him some insight into how to do his job better at home. For instance, at home, he can handle problems over the phone, most of the time. Since the Army uses different programs, he finds that he often has to go over and visually see a problem

before he is able to fix it.

Because the Army owns the network, the Air Force team works closely with them to take care of its communication needs. “The Army has been absolutely fantastic,” said Sergeant Dempsey. “They are very understanding and bend over backwards to help. I can’t say enough good things about how they operate.”

Because of the dust, the Airmen here find themselves often repairing equipment, said Sergeant Baker, something else they are not normally trained to do. “I am using personal knowledge to repair computers — I have seen floppy drives that are eaten through in a month, and hard drives that are broken within six months of installation.”

That mission is extremely important to the overall mission in Afghanistan — that of protecting the country and ensuring that the coalition teams get out to register voters. “I think it’s really good that we are getting everyone the opportunity to vote,” said Sergeant Baker. “That’s really important. It’s the next step to moving on and making Afghanistan a secure nation. The country has been pretty beat up over the past 30 years. It’s about time someone helped out.”

Airman 1st Class Demetrill Newman conducts a line test on a computer port at Bagram Air Base. Airman Newman, an information manager, doesn’t normally get involved in the technical side of the computer network.

