

Video-teleconferencing to bring deployed airmen closer to families

In an effort to bring deployed airmen and their families a little closer, the Air Force has been testing video-teleconferencing and videophones.

Since the program began in August 1997, hundreds of deployed people have enjoyed face-to-face video and audio connections with their families back home.

Once video link equipment has been successfully tested at a site, the equipment remains for use by deployed airmen.

Successful video link tests have been completed at more than 40 locations throughout the Air Force, including remote sites such as Croatia; Istres, France; and Sarajevo and Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In addition, over the recent holidays, deployed people at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey; Ramstein Air Base, Germany; and Osan AB, Korea, were connected to loved ones at various stateside and overseas locations.

At one of the more recent test sites, Soto Cano, Honduras, the deployment location for Joint Task Force Bravo — the Air Force component commander expressed appreciation on behalf of the Air Force folks there: "We have our video-teleconferencing system up and running ... what a great system ... thanks!"

Although initially focused on deployed airmen, video link equipment could eventually be available at most Air Force units.

For more information on obtaining video link equipment, units should visit the Air Force Communications Agency web site at www.afca.scott.af.mil/videophone.

Tour lengths shorten for Panama units

Tour lengths for Air Force members assigned to Howard Air Force Base, Panama, will be shorter effective March 1, according to officials at the Air Force Personnel Center, Randolph Air Force Base, Texas.

Blue-suiters assigned to the base will now serve a 12-month unaccompanied tour, versus a 36-month accompanied or a 24-month unaccompanied long tour.

Approved recently by the assistant secretary of defense for force management policy, the change affects members assigned to the 24th Wing, 640th Air Mobility Support Squadron, Air Force Legal Services Agency (Area Defense Council), and the 2nd Field Investigations Det. 214 (Office of Special Investigations).

The United States is scheduled to return control of the Panama Canal to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999. About 1,750 Air Force members are currently assigned to Howard Air Force Base.

Officials at Randolph said the changes will have little effect on people currently assigned to the base. Members will retain their original date of expected return from overseas, and family members will remain with their sponsors.

There are currently no plans to pro-rate tours for people assigned to Howard; however, officials said tour curtailments will be worked with local senior leadership and respective major commands based on management of local force structure actions.

Members with a reporting date after March 1 will be contacted by personnel officials for their options. These members will either remain on assignment and not bring their families, or possibly have their assignment canceled contingent on their individual vulnerability.

Local military personnel flights have more information on the tour length change.

Next AECF board to meet in June

Enlisted members interested in becoming commissioned officers have an opportunity with the Air Force's Airman Education and Commissioning Program.

The next AECF board meets June 23-25 to consider airmen who wish to pursue baccalaureate degrees in meteorology, computer science, computer engineering, electrical engineering, nursing and physical therapy.

Physical therapy applicants may also pursue a master's program.

Those interested in applying must get their memorandum of academic eligibility to the Air Force Institute of Technology by April 1.

The application deadline to Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps headquarters is May 15.

Base education offices can assist those interested in applying with their education packages.

Pay hoax circulates through Air Force

The Defense Finance and Accounting Service is reassuring Air Force members that not just anyone can use the new PayCall system to access their accounts.

Members became unnecessarily concerned about the security of their pay information after an erroneous e-mail message was circulated by an Air Force member stating anyone can use PayCall to establish a personal identification number and illegally access and alter another member's account. None of this is true, stressed DFAS officials.

PayCall uses a "read only" file that has been extracted from the main pay record data and is for informational purposes only. An Air Force member who wants to access his or her own records via PayCall must correctly answer a series of security questions before a PIN can be established.

PayCall can't be used to make changes to any data in the pay system. Changes to a pay account can only be made by the member's local Financial Services Office.

Air Force members can contact their base FSOs worldwide whenever they hear a rumor about a pay problem. The FSOs are kept apprised of military pay issues by DFAS.

DFAS-Denver Military Pay Director, Ronald Swenka said, "PayCall is an added pay service which gives a member direct access to information about his or her own account. Try PayCall and verify for yourself that it works."

Member access to PayCall is available 24 hours a day. Members can access the system by calling toll-free 1-800-755-7413 from the United States or DSN 926-1281 from overseas.