

Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D. Connecting TEAM AIR FORCE!

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Keeping track of family with busy schedules is tough...we are bombarded daily with messages about how to stay in touch. When your family is the U.S. Air Force, you face additional challenges to stay connected.

News media give us snapshot views of the individual members of our armed forces overseas. By numbers and locations, the Air Force family needs extensive coverage, reliability and manageability when meeting their communication needs.

Our many veterans and active duty military people know how responsibilities and demand constantly change and increase in any venue and how critical it is to have instant communications and current intelligence. In this presentation, I will review many concerns that face Telecommunications Management and how one Air Force base has resolved these challenges.

Looking at the "Big Picture"

Our teams need to be prepared and more importantly, to be flexible. Four key challenges face today's military communications community: 1) replacing out-dated telecom technology, 2) finding the best systems to maximize productivity, 3) assuring quality and delivery standards for new solutions, and 4) wanting it installed and fully operational yesterday. Add in the past three years of federal budget challenges, and you get a snapshot view of how our military is striving to do more with less.

Choosing the Best Partners

In a military context, we are all familiar with the term, "Specialist." Special schools, special training, special skills and testing requirements: with increasing numbers of personnel deployed in mission critical and support positions here and overseas, a heavier burden falls on the civilian partners and "specialists."

One of those Specialists is Forum Communications International. Based in Texas, Forum specializes in teleconference solutions. As the oldest conferencing manufacturer operating under the same name, Forum built its reputation with durable voice conferencing systems for the small to medium-sized business and enterprise. For many years, their largest end user has been the U.S. Government. Through Forum's many channel partners, the **Confer** and **Consortium** products are selected for quality, privacy and control for Air Force, Army, US Customs, the White House and other critical federal agencies.

In the wake of terrorist attacks and nationwide alerts, the need for instant conferencing and on-going conference calls has become even more critical for all government agencies. Security requirements are moving agencies away from public telephone networks for their conference calls, and most "primary crash" and "secondary crash" systems are over 20 years old and out of manufacture. With these recent trends, Forum Communications, working with their dealer partners and existing government installations is continuing to enhance and develop teleconferencing systems to meet the growing needs.

The Consortium Conference System from Forum is designed to support enterprise or government conferencing needs. With multiple security levels, internal recording and programmable blast dial functions, the Consortium can be used to connect first responders on emergency calls, or for status, daily and weekly meetings or remote training sessions.

Securing Internal Communications

"This is Airman Brown, on an unsecured line." Procedure in answering the phone in any Air Force Communication Center always includes two things: identifying yourself and announcing if the line is secure. During drills and alerts, the Communications Center is responsible for providing connectivity for remote locations, logistics and troop deployment.

For the telecom department at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota, that means hosting daily meetings, constant briefings and conference calls. Security protocols make it essential for the Air Force to host those calls on their own conference hardware. In addition to supporting the 319th Air Refueling Wing, Grand Forks AFB is also home to maintenance, operation, mission support and medical groups, including the Director of Staff and Inspector General offices. They also support the Operations Plan 8044 (formerly SOIP, Single Integrated Operational Plan) and Air Mobility Command (AMC) requirements.

Base Communications at Grand Forks AFB came up with a versatile and dependable teleconferencing solution to support their needs by partnering with Forum Communications. Four years ago, they purchased a 48-port Consortium conference server (software version 4.1) to support command needs. Recently they updated their existing technology adding new system functions, enhancing procedures AND meeting their budget restrictions, with the Consortium 4.5.

In use constantly since before the September 11, 2001 attacks on U.S. locations, the system is extremely reliable and has exceeded the telecom department's expectations, particularly when it came to ease of use, administration and minimal upkeep. The system can be pre-programmed to host unlimited "reservation-less" calls and meet-me calls. The blast dial function can be set to initiate an immediate dial out when a code is entered or to begin a call on time by calling all participants and transferring them into the correct call. Blast dial can be a great time-saver to connect participants in regularly scheduled status meetings, or to instantly connect command and response teams for any situation. This feature is also ideal for international calls.

The Consortium at Grand Forks has to be extremely durable for commanders' conference calls and critical management team meetings. Multiple security levels and codes allow for complete control.

By assigning lower levels of security, the system is also available for distance learning and training calls. Dynamic port allocation lets the conference system host multiple calls for support field operations and practice exercises, so that many departments, teams and units can use the bridge simultaneously.

Planning for the Unknown

Master Sgt. Don Cloutier, 319th Communications Squadron, knew that hardware enhancements and new software releases would improve the efficiency and functionality of his Consortium system. As the Grand Forks base started outgrowing their teleconference system, Sergeant Cloutier and his team researched what was essential to meet future needs and increasing traffic. The existing conference bridge was in constant demand with Homeland Security and deployment-related traffic, more ports were needed. Their back-up telephone crash system was an antique and well past repair. The Windows 2000 server upgrade would meet updated security requirements. The team could add CD-R/RW capability for backups. The wish list also began to include ways that the system could more fully utilize human resources

Just as business constantly demands enhanced productivity, the military is constantly reviewing and updating procedures and technology to manage efficiency. Hosting instant meetings and status calls remotely via conference call was becoming standard. Teleconferencing has moved into every aspect of operations, training, emergency response and executive command. With overseas deployments growing, support and telecom personnel at Grand Forks were being assigned elsewhere and training civilian operators became essential.

Moving other meetings to the conference system reduced travel expenses and time. Discussions could be scheduled en-route to a region and orders could be updated immediately as a particular event was developing. The immediacy of conference call collaboration allows officers to direct efforts to adjust to changing events, to keep a simple incident from evolving into a crisis, or to manage readiness in the event of an escalation.

After-effects of 9/11

Funding provided a major delay for the Communications Team at Grand Forks. Federal money was budgeted in 2001, but all dollars and projects were frozen after September 11th. Creating and organizing the Homeland Security Agency and re-organizing other Cabinet-level departments took first priority and required large scale planning, funding, re-organization and personnel.

Human resources and financial resources were stretched to cover the new integrated defense and safety programs.

Once Congress did release dollars, the funds were ear-marked for "essential" projects only. The definition of "essential" was tightened along with the purse-strings. Changes in procurement procedures and approvals only added to the delays. Local and state agencies were (and still are) lobbying to compete for federal funds for emergency preparedness.

Doing More With Less

For more than a year, the Grand Forks AFB team had to live with only minor changes. Funds had been allocated, but not released for upgrading their teleconferencing and emergency response equipment. Several options were considered to maximize the existing resources.

Finally in 2003, funds were announced for emergency communications funding. The Consortium system was already in use for "command/control" exercises at Grand Forks AFB, but ready for an upgrade and expansion. With Consortium's emergency "blast dial" capability to connect first responders, the telecom team at the base was able to replace the original Consortium system with a new Consortium server, upgrade all components AND add an additional 24 ports for a fraction of the cost of the original system.

The latest software included enhanced reporting and web-control functions. Robust reporting, tracking and recording functions in the Consortium provide the management tools to document and review actions so the diverse teams supported by Grand Forks can improve their preparedness status and procedures. Enhanced Web interface allows participants to log into the bridge via intranet and manage their live conferences. The system even lets users divide into multiple sub-conferences and then re-join the main conference without disconnecting to make a second call. Internal recording allows the Air Force Base to archive all conference calls or replay specific calls for training sessions.

Maximizing Human Resources

As the new installation was scheduled, Sergeant Cloutier and his team reviewed staffing and support needs, making sure civilian operators and clerks were included in system and administration training.

The Consortium training options allowed the base to determine which level of training they needed for which personnel:

1) Basic User training is designed for a non-technical person to learn to schedule and manage their conference calls in less than ten minutes.

2) The Consortium administrative functions are available in real-time. Master Schedule, Report and Moderator view screens allow the system administrator to see at a glance all calls that are scheduled, number of ports in use per system or per call. Trainees learned to review and manage overbooking capabilities and reports.

3) The Air Force required Maintenance Training and Certification for their technical support staff, a full one-day hands-on course that certified telecom technicians for Tier One troubleshooting and system expansion on the Consortium.

With small training classes (4 persons maximum) and personal attention, the team learned how to use new features and functions to maximize productivity on the system and how to clear the bridge instantly for priority calls.

Like other Consortium customers, Cloutier and his team report how easy the system is to use and administrate (It takes less than one hour per week for system administration, even when managing multiple systems).

One Solution to Meet All Response Needs

Managing logistics for global engagement requires critical communications for contingency response and conventional operations. The men and women of Grand Forks Air Force Base who provide refueling, airlift, medical support worldwide rely on each other and on their technology. Forum Communications is proud to be part of the team to support our Homeland Security and Defense programs and offers several options to meet teleconferencing and emergency conferencing needs.

Other Forum Solutions for Disaster Management

Incident management and disaster notification depend on reliable, quality conferencing. An event may involve a high level situation room, war room command/control applications, training and exercises, control tower, major catastrophes or local fire and security calls. Forum Communications offers many conferencing options for government and business solutions, based on applications, size and budget.

Two products released recently, the **Confer ECS** and **Confer ALERT** (Advanced Localized Emergency Response Teleconferencing) System, are specifically designed to provide "instant" blast dial functions for emergency calls and disaster notification.

The Confer ECS connects easily to any type of PBX or analog ports and doubles as a meet-me conference bridge as well as a "crash" system. The Confer ECS is designed for emergency collaboration and includes blast dial, crash blast and global crash functions. Multiple contact lists can be created and stored and the ECS can support multiple simultaneous calls, both meet-me and disaster notification calls.

The Confer ALERT is a form-fit replacement for the outdated Tellabs 291/292 (also referred to as red phone or firebar) systems. For dedicated crash solutions, the Confer ALERT System has touch-screen initiation. It connects to multiple ring-down circuits for immediate, fail-safe communication up to 5 miles with expansion to 72 ports. The control station screen indicates when a line at any remote station is ringing, is answered or if the person at that station is speaking. Clear conversation begins immediately, with no disturbing ring tones in the call to distract the response team. The ALERT system exceeds Air Force technical requirements AFI 12-203 and AFI 13-213 and provides three levels of immediate redundancy. Installation to replace the old 291/292 with the new ALERT requires less than 10 minutes of downtime in most cases and takes up less real estate in a control tower or phone room, making this a truly plug-and-play system.

The Confer family offers versatility and expansion capabilities and is designed to be truly affordable. For non-emergency conferencing, Confer III system is available as a simple meet-me bridge or with administrative options, GUI or Web Interface. Forum Communications partners superior technology with excellent customer service and support.

Over 7000 Forum conference bridges are in use worldwide. Other Forum locations include Hurlburt AFB, Fla., Andrews AFB, Md., Fort Lee, Va., Holloman AFB, N.M., and overseas military installations.

Forum Communications conference technology gives the Air Force the communication power that they need for day-to-day communications and project management as well. If you are interested in finding out more or would like to schedule a conference demo, please visit www.forum-com.com or call Forum at 972-680-0700.

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