



## Crew chiefs keep carriers flying

by Staff Sgt. Lindsey Maurice  
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2/5/2010 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA** -- Come rain, dust storms, extreme heat or cold, flightline operations in the Air Force must go on. This is especially true in the U.S. Air Force Central Command area of responsibility where troops downrange are awaiting reinforcements and supplies. Often a thankless job, it's up to the Airmen of the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing and its tenant units to get C-130 and C-17 fleets off the ground. Three of these vital enlisted career fields include loadmasters, crew chiefs and fuels specialists. This is the second part of a three-part series offering a closer look at one group of these professionals - crew chiefs.

Once a solid navy blue, the slightly worn, blackened fabric reflects the continuous hard work and dedication its owner has pledged to his aircraft.

The crew chief's coveralls bear witness to the countless hours spent on the flightline troubleshooting problems, fixing the jet, working with specialists, preparing the plane for flight and inspecting it after yet another mission within Southwest Asia.

Averaging a combined 350 missions a month, between the 737th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron C-130H fleet, 817th EAS C-17 fleet and 43rd Expeditionary Electronic Combat Squadron EC-130 fleet, each aircraft within the inventory faces its share of wear and tear. It's up to the men and women of the 386th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron and the 5th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron Operating Location Bravo and their crew chiefs to keep the jets in the skies.

"Based on their age, experience level and amount of time they've been in the Air Force, it's really different from when I came in," said Master Sgt. Martin Harris, 386th EAMXS production superintendent, deployed from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. "Crew chiefs on the line probably had about 10 to 12 years experience on the aircraft back then and today they average about 3 to 4 years."

"With that said, the mission they're doing out here speaks for itself," said the Baltimore, Md., native. "We haven't missed a line (sortie) yet. Everybody works hard, they work together and they do an outstanding job."

During each four-month rotation, C-130 crew chiefs are assigned to one aircraft for the duration of their deployment. The Airmen must inspect their assigned jet daily, as well as before and after each mission to ensure the aircraft is fully functional. If there is a problem within their capability to fix, such as a brake, tire or proper engine change, the crew chiefs will do so; otherwise they call on and assist a specialist within the unit.

"As a crew chief, my job is to perform safe, effective, by-the-book maintenance," said Senior Airman Rebecca Roa, 386th EAMXS C-130H crew chief, also deployed from Dyess AFB, Texas. "The way my job was originally described to me in tech school was that 'we are a jack of all trades and a master of none' and I have found this to be true to a 'T' since I started deploying.

"We're tasked with knowing all of the specialties, tasked with troubleshooting maintenance issues, changing components and following up with specialists when it comes to forms and other documentation, while the specialists are tasked with the main points on these categories. But at the end of the day, when the job is done, all the responsibility rests on the crew chiefs' shoulders. It's our plane; therefore, it's our responsibility. The one thing we can hold as our own is pride in the aircraft we are charged to take care of."

Senior Airman Dustin Axtell, 386th EAMXS EC-130 crew chief, deployed from Davis Monthan AFB, Ariz., said the biggest challenge he faces in the AOR is the higher ops tempo with a smaller aircraft fleet.

"The ops tempo here is much higher with fewer aircraft, so we really have to make what we have work,



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Dustin Axtell, 386th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron EC-130 crew chief, checks the tightness of a clamp on an exhaust tail pipe of a C-130 Jan. 22, 2010 at an air base in Southwest Asia. Airman Axtell is deployed from Davis Monthan AFB, Ariz. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Lakisha A. Croley/Released)

otherwise we miss lines, which isn't an option," said the Medford, Ore., native.

One of the other challenges many C-130 crew chiefs face is the aging fleet, now at the ripe age of about 35 years old, said Staff Sgt. Bradford Lewis, 386th EAMXS C-130H crew chief deployed from Yokota Air Base, Japan.

"The C-130 is an old airplane and the Air Force expects a lot out of it," said the Grass Valley, Calif., native. "It's hard to meet that expectation sometimes, especially here in the AOR where we have a higher opstempo and a set amount of lines we have to meet every day. We make it happen though. It takes dedication to the mission and to your plane."

Staff Sgt. Lance Duckworth, 5th EAMS C-17 flying crew chief deployed from Dover AFB, Del., said he shares some of the same experiences in the AOR as his C-130 counterparts, but faces his own unique challenges as well.

"I became a flying crew chief because I wanted to be a more well-rounded maintainer," said the Nocona, Texas, native. "Here my job entails inspecting the aircraft, helping the loadmaster, and maintaining an overall system knowledge base to answer any questions the flight crew may have and provide maintenance support."

Sergeant Duckworth and his fellow flying crew chiefs travel with the C-17 aircrews on most missions to locations in the AOR that do not have C-17 maintenance support on the ground, in case there is a maintenance issue.

"Here our missions are a lot shorter than back home, but we go at a much faster pace," he said. "Probably the biggest challenge is just being away from your family."

As one of the younger crew chiefs on base, with 21 months on the line, Airman 1st Class Jonathan Goke, 386th EAMXS C-130H crew chief deployed from Dyess AFB, Texas, said he is enjoying his time in the AOR.

"I get crap sometimes for being as dedicated to my job as I am, but I love it," said the Harrisburg, Pa., native. "It's the best job in the Air Force. I enjoy towing, rigging, sealing, working with the hardware and learning how almost all of the different systems tie into each other. I'm responsible for the overall well-being of every aspect of my aircraft. It's great."

Airman Roa, an Eagle Point, Ore., native, echoes Airman Goke's enthusiasm for their job as she dons her navy blue coveralls for another day of labor-intensive work with her jet.

"I have the satisfaction of knowing that I put the Herkies in the Heavens," she said. "I put iron down range to give support to our brothers and sisters in arms who are on the front line. The fact that people flying on our aircraft will reach their destination safely because of the overall effort by the people in my squadron makes the long hours and stress that oftentimes comes with this job worth it."