



Loadmasters keep cargo, passengers moving in AOR

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1/27/2010 - **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 first part of a three-part series offering a closer look at one group of these professionals - loadmasters.*

4 a.m.: As the rear door opens, a pool of light illuminates the darkness surrounding the jet. Two men emerge from the back, inhaling the cold, dry air as they ready themselves for the first of several runs of the day. With an hour of briefings and equipment issue behind them, it's now two hours until takeoff and there is plenty more to do before the rest of the crew arrives.

After pouring his third cup of coffee, Senior Airman Robert Gantz closes his thermos and reviews his checklists. Although his pre-flight inspection is second nature to him, after two years with the airframe and more than 50 Southwest Asia missions behind him over the last three months, complacency is not an option.

With speed and accuracy, Airman Gantz and his co-C-130H loadmaster, Airman 1st Class Jonathan Granata, both of the 737th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron based here, navigate through the cargo bay bedding down objects; checking seatbelts and supplemental oxygen, cargo restraints, interior lighting and other pertinent systems; and ensuring the tactical airlifter has the right configuration for its first load of passengers and cargo. They must keep the aircraft within permissible center of gravity limits throughout the flight.

"There are a lot of responsibilities that come with being a loadmaster," said Airman Gantz, deployed from the Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. "We're accountable for anything that happens in the cargo compartment. You need to be quick on your feet and able to adapt to any given situation. It can be challenging at times, but I welcome the responsibility."

5 a.m.: With the cargo bay ready, the passengers and cargo have arrived. The loadmasters begin supervising the loading of passengers and assist aerial port Airmen as they upload a pallet of luggage and equipment aboard the aircraft.

The "hard" crew has been working side-by-side for three months now and run through the choreographed routine with ease.

"One of the best aspects of working out here is being a part of a crew," said Airman Granata, also deployed from Dyess AFB, Texas. "The fact that you get to interact with the same six people the whole deployment [two pilots, a navigator, flight engineer and two loadmasters] is nice. You build a bond."

The C-17 crews of the 817th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron also fly as hard crews during their rotations at the undisclosed air base in Southwest Asia, which include two pilots and two loadmasters.

"You build a trust with one another," said Staff Sgt. Miguel Leon, 817th EAS loadmaster deployed from McGuire AFB, N.J. "Out here, your crew is your family."

6 a.m.: With passengers and cargo secure and engines running, it's time for takeoff. One last run around the jet to make sure all the exits are closed and nothing is hanging out and the loadmasters disappear into the back of the plane for the final taxi down the runway.



SOUTHWEST ASIA -- U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Dean Maguadog, 817th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron C-17A loadmaster, assists with a transient member's baggage Jan. 15, 2010 at an air base in Southwest Asia. Sergeant Maguadog, a Lakewood, Wash., native, is deployed from the 6th Airlift Squadron, McGuire, Air Force Base, N.J. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Lakisha A. Croley/Released)

As the crew travels through the skies of Southwest Asia, their mission is far from over. Their checklists continue, as they monitor hydraulic systems, cargo restraints, cargo movement and ensure the welfare of passengers.

"It's a common misconception that loadmasters sleep in the back during flight," said Tech. Sgt. Bradley Nulf, 737th EAS loadmaster and ramp coordinator also deployed from Dyess AFB, Texas. "There's no 'wheels up, heels up' for us. A lot can happen back there and we need to make sure we're vigilant."

After a few hours in the air, the crew arrives at its first destination, another undisclosed location in Southwest Asia. With a 30-minute deadline, the loadmasters must unload all passengers and cargo and reload another group for its next destination. The timeline is strict, so they must be thorough and quick - communication is key.

"Being the new guy, I'd say dealing with other people is probably the biggest challenge," said Airman Granata, a six-month loadmaster and Dayton, Ohio, native. "Dealing with the other loadmaster -- finding that median and keeping up with the pace out here can be tough. Many of these guys have been deployed three or four times and it's become second nature to them. You just have to find a way to keep up and stay focused. It's hard at times, but fun."

Capable of carrying about four times the load of a C-130, at about 85 tons compared to 21, the C-17 crews are accustomed to a similar time crunch between stops, oftentimes having an hour to unload close to 150 passengers and six pallets of gear and reload a similar configuration.

"The [operations] tempo here is high," said Sergeant Leon, a Miami, Fla., native. "There's a lot to get done in a short amount of time. You have to have a passion for the job. You have this \$200 million plane and everything from the cockpit back falls on your shoulders. You can't help but strive to do the best you can; people are counting on you."

The 737th and 817th EAS fly a combined 300 missions a month.

Sergeant Nulf, a former loadmaster technical school instructor, said it's exciting to see some of the young Airmen he taught excelling in the AOR.

"I couldn't be more proud of the young loadmasters out here," said the Columbia City, Ind., native. "Some of these guys couldn't walk around the cargo compartment without falling over themselves and getting tangled up in the cord and now here they are doing the mission downrange and doing it well."

5 p.m.: The crew makes its final descent of the day, back to its home base in Southwest Asia. Everyone aboard the jet is all smiles. For the crew, it means a day of rest before the next go. For the Soldiers aboard, it's the first destination on the final journey back home to see their families.

"You really feel like you're contributing to the mission here," said Airman Gantz, an Akron, Penn., native. "We're constantly taking personnel and cargo in and out of the AOR. But the most rewarding of all is when you go pick up [forward deployed military members] and bring them back here knowing you brought them the first leg of their way home. That's a feeling you can't get when you're at home station, and it's awesome!"