



Fuels flight keeps mission pumping

by Staff Sgt. Lindsey Maurice
386th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

2/7/2010 - 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 third part of a three-part series offering a closer look at one group of these professionals - fuels specialists.

With lightning flashing in the distance and windblown rain drops blotting his goggles, the NCO remains calm and focused on the task at hand.

With 15 8,000-gallon fuel trucks lined up to his left and the weather showing no signs of letting up anytime soon, time is of the essence. With a positive visual fuel sample, he gives the first four trucks his seal of approval, emptying their contents through the fuel lines into the on-base storage area. The sergeant hopes the trucks can finish offloading before the lightning gets within five nautical miles - otherwise the mission will be put on hold.

"I've worked in every weather condition from below freezing to above 130 degrees Fahrenheit in Iraq," said Tech. Sgt. Rick Rojas, 386th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron fuels management flight offload supervisor, deployed from the 183rd Fighter Wing, Illinois Air National Guard. "But we can't let that slow us down. The main mission of the Air Force is to fly and our mission is to get fuel to those planes so they can do their job of getting supplies and troops downrange. That's why it's important for us to move with a sense of urgency."

With the first four trucks downloaded and the second four halfway finished, the warning is issued - "lightning within five." The mission is postponed. The seasoned NCO, a Springfield, Ill., native, adapts and after several hours of stop and goes, the day's fuel is fully offloaded --the first step of a detailed mission is complete.

"A lot of people don't realize just how much work goes on behind the scenes here," said Master Sgt. Daniel Greene, 386th ELRS fuels management flight chief deployed from Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark. "Most people just see the big green truck out on the flightline or our FORCE (fuels operational readiness capability equipment), but what they don't see is us offloading the fuel, receiving and transferring it and all of the little intricate details that go into getting that fuel onto the flightline. I think if they just spent a day here to see what goes on behind the scenes, they'd really be amazed."

Once in the storage area, additional fuels team members monitor the fuel bladders, each capable of holding up to 200,000 gallons, to ensure they don't overflow. The experts must also control the valves to ensure equal distribution between each bladder.

It's here, that Staff Sgt. James Williams, 386th ELRS fuels laboratory technician, begins his mission of ensuring the quality and control of aviation fuel and lubricants.

"I sample the fuel in the laboratory after we receive it, while we store it and right before we issue it to make sure the quality of the fuel is at its best and within Air Force specifications," said the Sacramento, Calif., native deployed from Travis AFB, Calif. "The most challenging part of my job comes on the rare occasion that a sample fails. Trying to troubleshoot the main cause of a failure can be difficult."



U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Colin Orr, 386th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron fuels distribution operator, hauls a fuel hose toward a nearby C-130H Jan. 26, 2010 at an air base in Southwest Asia. Airman Orr, a Dover, N.H., native, is deployed from Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D. (U.S. Air Force photo illustration by Staff Sgt. Lakisha A. Croley/Released)

For the vast majority of the jet fuel, all that passes Sergeant Williams' strict testing, it's off to the ramp bladders where it is ready for distribution to the base's C-130 and C-17 fleet and all U.S. transient aircraft via the flight's fuel trucks (primarily used for C-130s and smaller transient aircraft) or the FORCE (used to fuel C-17s).

"FORCE, which first came here in 2005, replacing our old Vietnam era equipment, increases our issue, receipt and transfer capabilities with newer-design pumps (R-18), filters (R-19) and servicing platforms (R-20)," said Sergeant Greene, a Longview, Texas, native. "The R-14, which was part of the old system, could optimally pump 600 gallons per minute. In contrast, a single R-18 can optimally pump 900 GPM and we can also link the R-20s and R-18s so they can communicate to keep the fuel flowing."

Airman 1st Class Colin Orr, 386th ELRS fuels distribution operator, deployed from Grand Forks AFB, N.D., is one of several fuels truck operators within the wing.

"I basically spend my days driving the trucks and refueling aircraft whenever we get a call," said the Dover, N.H., native.

On this particular day, one of the FORCE hoses has gone bad, so Airman Orr and fellow fuels distribution operator Airman 1st Class Jerald Dewolf, a Pleasant Grove, Utah, native, deployed from Scott AFB, Ill., work together to conduct a four-truck refueling of a C-17 out on the ramp.

The Airmen gather their belongings and head out to the trucks, being looked over by one of the team's two resident refueling maintenance specialists, Senior Airman Ryan Parks, deployed from Grand Forks AFB, N.D. Airman Parks, a Wichita, Kan., native, must conduct a checkpoint inspection of each vehicle in the fuels fleet daily to make sure they're fully serviceable and when they're not, it's up to him to troubleshoot and fix them.

With a green light from Airman Parks, Airmen Orr and Dewolf head out. The first stop is to the ramp bladders to fill the 6,000-gallon fuel trucks, then it's out to a nearby C-17. With the trucks in place, the Airmen exit their vehicles and carefully grab the fuel hoses (weighing up to 50 pounds when fully extended). With speed and precision they haul the hefty load about 50 feet toward the jet and begin to fill its massive tank.

"To do well at our job you have to have a good attitude and you have to be physically fit to pull these hoses all day," said Airman Orr.

In a typical day, the fuels service center (the focal point for the fuels operation) can receive anywhere from 40-50 flightline fuels requests to which the operator dispatches one or more of the fuels distribution operators.

"We stay pretty busy for the most part, it just depends on what the mission entails that day," Airman Orr said.

After a full day of bad weather conditions and offloading fuel, storing, testing, distributing it and maintaining the fuels fleet, the flight boards their van and heads to the dining facility for a "family" dinner. It's one last chance to joke and unwind after a long day.

"We work hard and play hard," said Tech. Sgt. Joseph Pugh, 386th ELRS fuels distribution supervisor deployed from the 175th Logistics Readiness Squadron, Maryland Air National Guard. "Fuels has always been a tight-knit community - this is your family out here."

"We get the mission done, but we make sure we have fun along the way," said the San Juan, Puerto Rico, native.