

Maintaining Air

“We’re basically a whole bunch of guys running around, making sure that the airplanes that are supposed to fly, are going to fly.”

By Jessica Ferguson

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LITTLE ROCK AIR FORCE BASE, Ark. (LRAFB) – Stories about heroes do not always involve a villain, a damsel, and a knight riding in on a white horse to save the day. Stories about heroes sometimes involve aircraft and a group of honorable men and women that work tirelessly day-in and day-out to keep those aircraft in tip-top shape.

A common misconception about the United States Air Force is flying. Many people think that those that work for the Air Force, fly aircraft. The truth; however, is the complete opposite. Today, less than 4 percent of airman fly aircraft. The majority of airmen serving in the Air Force serve in supporting roles, one of the largest of which is that of aircraft maintainers and one of the largest

AFSC's (Air Force Specialty Codes) inside of the maintainer group is that of the Tactical Aircraft Maintainer, or more commonly referred to as a Crew Chief.

“It’s kind of funny what they say, they say that a Crew Chief is like a glorified gas station attendant; basically, you do a little bit of everything. They say you’re a jack of all trades, but a master of none,” said Senior Master Sergeant Michael Ezell. “So, you know a whole lot about everything on the plane, but you really don’t specialize in any of them. You’ve got a well-rounded understanding of what the airplane is supposed to do.”

Crew Chief job duties include day-to-day maintenance, diagnostics of malfunctions, replacing components, and inspections of aircraft. A typical day for a Crew Chief will vary based on the airframe they are assigned to.

Little Rock Air Force Base is home to the Lockheed C-130 Hercules, a four-engine turboprop aircraft designed to transport troops, cargo, and medevac.

Crew Chiefs assigned to a C-130 begin their shift making sure that each of the aircraft scheduled to fly during that shift is in proper flying condition.

“Most days you’re going to get there, depending on what shift that you’re on, you’re going to have airplanes that are going to fly; so, your first priority is always your flyers for the day. They have to be inspected, they have to be refueled, and any other work that needs to be done to them to have them ready to fly and properly configured – for Air Mobility Command, you’re going to be hauling some type of cargo or passengers,” said Ezell. “You’re going to have to configure the plane to either accept cargo or to have seats for people to sit in. Just whatever you’re doing. Of course, when I was in Florida, doing C-130 gunship stuff, we had to have it configured with whatever type of ammunition the plane was going to shoot that day.”

Following getting the “flyers” ready for flight at the beginning of shift, a Crew Chief will then move on to taking care of the aircraft that are unflyable and needing repair.

Although Crew Chiefs have a wide range of duties, their top priority is making sure the aircraft is going to take-off, fly, and land without issue. There have been only three recorded United States military aircraft crashes since 2010 that are attributed to maintainer failure.

- In 2017 a United States Marine Corps KC-130T crashed in Mississippi due to improper repairs to a corroded propeller blade.
- In 2018 a United States Air National Guard WC-130H crashed in Georgia due to a failed diagnosis of engine malfunction prior to takeoff, combined with pilot error.
- In 2020 a United States Air Force E-11A crashed in Afghanistan due to a broken turbine blade on the left engine, also combined with pilot error.

Small, human errors during pre-flight inspections or repairs can lead to the loss of aircraft and potentially the loss of life.

“Attention to detail. I know that is kind of a cliché answer, but that’s the truth,” said Technical Sergeant Coleman Wescott, when asked what the most critical part of being a Crew Chief is.

“There are some things that you can miss, and one of the issues of being a Crew Chief is you do the same stuff over and over and over again. 90 percent of our job is inspections. We are looking at airplanes that are not broken, trying to find problems with them. So, it becomes monotonous fairly quick, and if you get lazy, you could miss something very significant.”

As attention-oriented as this career is, the instant gratification of seeing the end result makes the job worth it. Anyone that loves the satisfaction of instant gratification, this is possibly a career choice for you.

“You get to see a direct impact to the mission,” said Wescott. “Literally, it’s our last name on that form before the aircrew takes it, so the direct impact to the mission is huge.”

And whatever that mission may be, we know the Crew Chiefs will be there to make sure it happens.