

## Maintainers turn Rivet Joint

by Staff Sgt. Francesca Popp  
CENTAF-FWD News Team

11/21/2006 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA (AFPN)** -- A sergeant sits at the end of a table reviewing maintenance records. In the background, Airmen play video games as a college football game blares on a television.

The call that the RC-135 Rivet Joint is 30 minutes out comes down, and in an instant everyone drops what they are doing. It's time to recover the aircraft after its long sortie.

It can take the Airmen as little as two hours to recover the RC-135 if little or no maintenance is needed, or 10 hours or more if an overhaul or any particular part must be replaced.

"Our job doesn't get boring," said Staff Sgt. Steven Lantz, 379th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, 55th Aircraft Maintenance Unit dedicated crew chief. "Something different happens every day. Outside of when the aircraft takes off and lands, the team doesn't know what to expect."

To prepare for the aircraft's arrival, the team walks the tarmac looking for and picking up anything that could potentially damage an engine.

As the aircraft approaches, one of the five crew chiefs marshals it to a stop. Two other crew chiefs drag yellow wheel chocks and place them in front of and behind the tires. Simultaneously, other team members unravel jumbo power cords from a generator and hook them to the aircraft. The side of the aircraft opens and a maintenance stair stand is rolled in to place.

The inspection begins. The aircrew briefs the lead maintainers to let them know what systems on the aircraft didn't work properly in flight. The crew chiefs visually inspect every inch of the plane's exterior, looking for anything out of the ordinary like popped rivets or screws missing. They also re-insert "remove before flight" flags and ground the aircraft.

The 44-year-old reconnaissance aircraft, weighing nearly 150 tons carrying an extensive inventory of electronics and a manifest of 34 crew members, puts a lot of stress on its landing gear, tires and brakes each time it touches down.

The AMU, with less than 50 people, repaired more than 16,000 maintenance discrepancies in fiscal 2006.

Sergeant Lantz and the AMU team on duty, deployed from Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., pile into the truck and head to the ramp.

"My aircraft is one of the heavier flown out of the Offutt AFB fleet. When it flies, it's one of the most dependable there is," said Staff Sgt. James Parker, dedicated crew chief. However, "when it breaks it breaks hard."

In the year he's been a crew chief, Sergeant Parker has overhauled two main and one nose landing gear assemblies on the Rivet Joint.

In November, the Air Force added its newest RC-135 to the existing fleet of 16, which are owned and operated by the 55th Wing at Offutt AFB. Sergeant Lantz said each of these aircraft, no matter when they were built, can be "moody."

"Every jet has its own characteristics. For maintainers, it could be the fuel cell jet -- one that constantly leaks fuel, or the Code 1 jet, the one that always flies without any discrepancies," he said. "Everyone believes their (RC-135) is the best, it's all part of a competition between crew chiefs to have the best flying jet."

"This aircraft platform has so many different entities coming together to make one mission," Sergeant Lantz said. The front and back end maintainers, both military and civilian, the pilots and mission crews collectively keep the RC-135 joint flying.

As the buzz continues outside, Airmen inside from the AMU and 763rd Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron check to see if any fuses, wires or devices need to be replaced. The plane, configured with computer systems stacked floor to ceiling and running the entire length of the plane, intercepts and translates every sound found in the radio frequency spectrum.

Senior Airman Kevin Tarwater, electronic warfare technician, is one of the many specialists in the AMU and ERS who repair the aircraft's sophisticated electronic equipment.

"Our system is integral to the RJ's mission," he said. "Whether we are finding surface-to-air missiles sites or intercepting a (roadside bomb) plot, we are right there stopping the enemy."

On average, it takes close to two years for these technicians to become 100 percent qualified to perform the 146 core tasks that are needed to maintain the planes sophisticated intelligence gathering hardware.

Sergeant Lantz added all RC-135 maintainers ensure the equipment can "gather intel to help commanders shape the battlefield and, hopefully, have a positive outcome for the Soldier in the field. Our mission has a direct impact for the troops on the ground."

(Master Sgt. Scott Wagers contributed to this story)