

FEATURE

Flight kitchen keeps cookin' 24/7

By Capt. Tracy Velino
437 AW Public Affairs

The closest thing to turkey dinner for Charleston AFB aircrews taking off Thanksgiving Day will be a boxed lunch turkey sandwich. And anyone who's ever eaten a boxed lunch from the 437th Services Squadron flight kitchen knows it's almost as plentiful as a Thanksgiving spread.

Even though it's not made with as much love, it's certainly made by a crew that takes pride in its product.

Staff Sergeants Jeff Cureton and Luke Bell, outgoing and incoming noncommissioned officers in charge of the flight kitchen, say boxed lunches today are not like the ones that earned the name "boxed nasties" years ago.

"I think the term boxed nasties refers to way back around twelve years ago," said Cureton, referring to a time when meals were similar to the contents of current MREs.

Today, CAFB boxed lunches are made up of name-brand commercial goods people can purchase from the commissary.

"When we switched over to commercial distributors, we addressed customer complaints and began purchasing name-brand products," said Bell.

The NCOIC is responsible for menu choices. "We have total control over what kind of food we get," said Cureton. "Right now we're trying to expand the menu and make some changes, but it takes time to work it out with the food distributor, and to see if the item can hold up for at least five hours without refrigeration."

The flight kitchen provides meals for aircrew members and passengers on DOD flights taking off from Charleston AFB, and for swing and mid-shift workers on the flight line. Typically the meals include an entrée, soda, juice, cookies, candy, chips, pudding and fruit. They also provide MREs and water as required by aircrews for special missions.

Due to time constraints, passengers processing through the passenger terminal receive a turkey sandwich, along with standard beverages and snacks. For the aircrews and flight line workers, there are seven entrees to choose from, including chicken sandwiches, chef salads, baked chicken, club hoagies, tuna meals and ham and cheese croissants.

"The most popular is the chicken sandwich," said Airman 1st Class Latasha Capleton, a food specialist. "Second is the chef salad. That's also my favorite."

The aircrews can also choose between standard supplements to the entrée, or a healthier version. Distinguished visitor missions have access to the same menu as the aircrews.

Aircrews place their orders two hours prior to



Staff Sgt. Luke Bell (center), Incoming flight kitchen NCOIC, and Staff Sgt. Jeff Cureton (right), outgoing NCOIC, review the food delivery list with deliveryman Frank Weans, of Monarch Food Services.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Pamela Smith

departure. "This allows fleet services enough time to get there, pick up their meals and deliver them about an hour prior to departure," said Cureton.

Aircrews pay \$2.65 for each meal, and all others pay \$3.20—a bargain when you compare the contents to grocery store prices. The flight kitchen has to come out no more than two percent above or below breaking even each month, according to Senior Airman Fredrick McBride, store room operator.

McBride transmits orders by PC modem five times each week to a food distributor in Kentucky. The distributor arranges for three local deliveries weekly. The orders are done based on a headcount for a seven-day cycle.

"We use the previous week's headcount," said Cureton. "In the event someone gives us a heads up there will be a special flight, like a



Photo by Capt. Tracy Velino

Airman 1st Class Fredrick McBride looks at a printout of boxed lunch requests.

distinguished visitor or junior ROTC flight, we'll know to add onto that order."

Four hundred meals a week is typical, said Cureton.

Meal orders come to the flight kitchen by fax, phone and in person. Aircrews fax their requests, and the flying squadrons hand-carry the payment to the flight kitchen at the end of each day.

"We have a hotline to the passenger terminal," said Cureton. The terminal calls in tentative orders about an hour and a half out, and confirms about 30 minutes before delivery.

"We fill the boxes when the order comes in and fleet picks them up and takes them to the plane," said Cureton.

Requests from flight line personnel come in all three methods, two hours prior to sending a runner to pay and pick up the food.

There are six members on the flight kitchen staff, including the NCOIC, store room operator and four shift workers.

"You work at your own pace here," said Cureton. The workload depends on the number of scheduled aircraft departures. "Some days it can be one, and some days it can be a madhouse. The exciting part is when you get surprise missions that drop out of the sky."

"A couple of months ago, Fort Bragg sent in 300 jumpers at around 9 o'clock at night who were going to be on the ground 45 minutes, and they needed meals, and we have only one person on duty at night," he said. "We had the support group commander, services squadron commander and first sergeant, Senior Airman Jermie McCall (the shift worker) in here, and a couple of guys on the fleet. We actually did it in an hour and 10 minutes."

Bell said large military operations mean a lot of work for the flight kitchen. "During Operation Restore Hope we had to send out pallets and pallets of MREs and water."

Now that the C-141 no longer flies out of CAFB, the kitchen staff said their workload has lessened. "The C-17 has a smaller crew," said Cureton. "Less crew equals less meals." He said he served crews of up to twenty-one people for some C-141 missions.

But still there are times when they get a call that twenty meals are needed in ten minutes, said McBride. "We can't make the missions late. Late missions go before the wing commander, and we don't want to be the reason."

The staff says the customer comes first. Capleton said, "We work with them to help resolve any problem or last-minute request as fast as possible."

McBride added, "I get the good calls, where the customers say we really appreciate what you do. That's enough for me—I know I'm doing what I'm doing for a reason."