

FEATURE

Midnight Maintenance

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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 437 AW PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Working aircraft maintenance after the sun goes down is a job filled with unique members of Team Charleston who make batteries and sunglasses close friends.

"It's not natural to stay up this late," said Master Sgt. Michael Pawlak, 437th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron mid-shift avionics production superintendent, as he holds a flashlight to see by. "Humans were not

meant to be nocturnal. We definitely go through a lot of batteries."

According to Pawlak, it takes time for people to adjust to never seeing the sun but, once they make the adjustment, being awake during daylight hours can be challenging.

"Sunglasses are definitely our friends," he joked.

According to Pawlak, maintaining aircraft by moonlight is somewhat different than the work that goes on during the daylight hours.

"Dayshift is mostly generation of aircraft, and nightshift is what we call recovery and preparation," said Pawlak. "In other words, airplanes leave during the day and come back during the night.

"The joke is, they break them on days, and we fix them on nights," he continued. "On average, we have 50-60 people on nights. Sometimes, we might have more than that."

The lack of light isn't the only obstacle overcome by AMXS. The unusual working hours is also a battle all their own.

"(Balancing a family) can be extremely difficult at times because it means sacrificing some sleep to have a family life," said Pawlak.

Even those who don't have families in the area can also feel the pressure of midnight hours.

"The gym and (medical) appointments (for example) don't coordinate with our schedules," said



Senior Airman James Collins, 437 AMXS, installs a static line on a C-17.

Airman 1st Class Alex Arntz, 437 AMXS guidance and control systems specialist. "If you want to do something during the day, it's a real drain."

Agreeing with Arntz, Airman 1st Class Miguel Vela, 437 AMXS AFIN specialist, added, "We may get the occasional day off, but we don't have holidays. We're here 24-7."

Aside from the hours, safety is also a concern taken very seriously, according to Pawlak.

"It gets cold in the winter, and the (work pace) slows down a bit," said Pawlak. "South Carolina is known for black ice you can't see, and in the summer, it gets dewy, and the plane can be slippery."

Another big safety concern is adjusting to new sleeping patterns. "We always brief people, especially during the first few weeks of (working nights)," continued Pawlak. "They have to learn to set off a flare (or signal) if there's a problem, especially if they get tired."

Waking after the sun goes down and going back to bed before the sun rises again, leaves little time for so-called fun in the sun and more time for after-hours entertainment.

"At night, there's not as many launches, so there's less pressure," said Arntz. "Plus, you don't have to wear sunscreen."

Vela agreed and added, "It's a more relaxed atmosphere."

According to Pawlak, AMXS works through the nighttime barriers, but still knows how to have a little fun.

"What I like the most about (working nights) is the camaraderie," said Pawlak. "I take care of (my people) and they take care of me."

"We try to have a lot of fun out here," he continued. "If you come to work and it's boring, who wants to re-enlist?"

All in all, there's more to maintenance after midnight than wearing a reflective belt.



Airman 1st Class Charlie Rucker, 437 AMXS, removes a heads-up-display carrying frame from inventory.



Above: Senior Airman Aaron Williams, 437 AMXS, installs an identification friend or foe transmitter/receiver.



Left: Airman Matthew McNea, 437 AMXS, wheels away a tire after it was replaced.



Staff Sgt. Jerry Robertson, 437 AMXS, inspects the breaks and axle of a C-17 while Airman 1st Class Ronny Cunningham, 437 AMXS, provides light to work by.