

Mission critical

CSAR maintainers keep helicopters flying

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When the motto is “these things we do, that others may live,” any mistake can be a matter of life and death.

Responsible for maintaining the HH-60G Pavehawk helicopters flown by members of the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, the men and women of the 64th Expeditionary Helicopter Maintenance Unit know their work is vital to the combat search and rescue mission.

A typical day starts with crew chiefs looking over their aircraft to make sure everything is working properly. Each aircraft has a schedule for inspections and a schedule for aircrews to perform their checks with the aircraft in a hover. The maintainers are also responsible for the launching and recovering of the aircraft for their alert missions.

“Every 72 hours we perform pre-flight checks, which entails breaking the aircraft down into six sections to inspect,” said Tech. Sgt. Michael Montagno, dedicated crew-chief deployed from Davis Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. “We maintain alert status so we’re always ready no matter what.”

Sergeant Montagno said that the unit maintains a fleet of helicopters that fly a combined total of more than 250 hours a month. The constant flying does wear on the airframe, and things such as cracks and body damage must be fixed on a regular basis.

Paying attention to detail is critical, said Staff Sgt. Priscilla Vinyard, 64th EHMU aircraft structural maintenance journeyman deployed from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

“Our mission here is to retrieve people. If these birds (helicopters) can’t fly, we can’t accomplish this,” she said. “We have to take our jobs seriously; other people’s lives are at stake. It’s not just the crews, but the people that have to be saved.”

The challenge the maintainers face is working with more airframes and increased amounts of flying, said Chief Master Sgt. Deborah Systemann, 64th EHMU superintendent, also deployed from Nellis AFB.

“We overcome the challenge of fewer people by working as a team to get aircraft fixed and flying,” she said. “It can’t be about ‘I’ or ‘me’ — it’s about ‘us’ and ‘we.’”

Despite the challenges for the combat search and rescue maintainers, a hard day’s work is gratifying.

“I love my job,” Sergeant Montagno said. “I know I’m making a difference when a helicopter is successfully launched and the people on it come back safely.”

“I enjoy getting my hands dirty right here turning the wrenches,” Sergeant Vinyard said. “I like being a part of the team and helping however I can.”

Even after a long day, the maintainers take great pride in fixing helicopters and giving the crews and pararescuemen the best maintained and safest helicopters possible across the globe, Chief Systemann said.

“Rescue isn’t just the mission, it’s also a mind set,” she said. “It’s what we do and it’s who we are.”



(Top) Staff Sgt. Craig Welchans, 64th Expeditionary Helicopter Maintenance Squadron crew chief, performs checks on an HH-60G Pavehawk Monday. Sergeant Welchans is deployed from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. (Below) An HH-60G Pavehawk helicopter is prepared for launch Nov. 11 here. The members of the 64th Expeditionary Helicopter Maintenance Squadron are responsible for maintaining the aircraft flown by the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron.