

Air Force surpasses 1 million sorties in GWOT

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LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, Va. (ACCNS) -- The Air Force recently boasted a 1-million sortie milestone for operational military flying missions, flown in support of the Global War on Terror.

Among the types of sorties contributing to Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and Noble Eagle are heavy and cargo airlift in and out of theater, close-air support, unmanned aerial vehicles missions in theater, and air-to-air sorties.

Each career field in the Air Force impacts the generation of sorties in some way or another, from cooks to maintainers, to pilots.

The work load that goes into more than 1 million sorties is extensive - the sorties themselves only represent the tip of a massive foundation supporting them. Maintainers are only one example of behind-the-scene support to flight.

"These jets need constant maintaining to keep up with the [operations] tempo," said Staff Sgt. Craig Hanrahan, 332nd Expeditionary Maintenance Squadron aircraft fuels systems repair journeyman deployed to Balad, Iraq, from Spangdahlem AB, Germany.

Across the Air Force there are squadrons of Airmen who specialized in different areas of aircraft maintenance, ensuring America's airpower is ready to engage the enemy anytime, anyplace.

Just like vehicles, aircraft undergo scheduled maintenance inspections after the aircraft has been flown for a specified number of hours, said Staff Sgt. Leonard DeLeon, 332nd EMXS fuels systems journeyman deployed from Hill AFB, Utah. Deployed Airmen take turns working 12-hour shifts day and night to get aircraft returned to flying status following these "major inspections," which take approximately 72 hours to complete.

"Every time a jet comes to us, we de-panel it and we break down the gear and do all the special inspections of the gear and the entire jet," said Staff Sgt. Daniel Crane, 332nd EMXS phase section floor chief deployed from Spangdahlem AB. "Then we remove parts that we find are cracked or out of limits and then replace them and do all the [operations] checks before we return the jet to the flightline."

The F-16s flying in support of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom are being flown five times more than during peacetime. Since the aircraft are flown more frequently, they must also be inspected and serviced more, which means more work for maintainers. Additional factors maintainers take into consideration are combat maneuvers performed by pilots and the mechanical effects these maneuvers have on the aircraft.

Extreme weather conditions also increase wear on planes.

"In the sandy environment, the F-16 tends to have a lot more strain put on its components,"

Sergeant Hanrahan said. "There are more leaks and damage just due to the elements."

As the jets age, the Air Force gathers information from the maintainers who work on the airframes about what issues affect the fleet as a whole, Sergeant Hanrahan said. With this knowledge, more inspections and upgrades are implemented to mitigate these issues.

Even with the aging fleet, long workdays and extreme weather conditions, Air Force Airmen have made it possible for pilots to fly 1 million sorties over the last five years and nearly 5,000 close-air support sorties this year alone.

"It's gratifying knowing that we get to take part in world-changing events," Sergeant Hanrahan said. "It's also an honor to work on aircraft in the Air Force."

Air Force pilots have been flying operations over the same terrain in Iraq ever since 1991, the beginning of the first Gulf War, but the 1 million sortie milestone represents only missions flown following September 11, 2001.

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