By SSgt Randy Roughton, Grand Forks AFB, N.D.

ORM Keeps Us Safe

Teeth chatter, hands shake, even bones ache through cold-weather gloves.

While almost all North Dakota wildlife is in hiding, and most people here are sheltered indoors from the sub-zero temperatures and brutal 40 mph winds, 319th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron workers are fighting the elements while doing their job on the flightline.

"Cold weather is a totally different game," said TSgt Brian Greene, a 319 AMXS hydraulics technician. "Everything is more complicated, your work load quadruples, but it's the wind that kills you."

Maintainers at Grand Forks are outstanding examples of how to use Operational Risk Management in conducting operations safely. In extreme cold, airmen in the 319th Maintenance Group have always used a buddy system for working on the flightline. People check their buddies frequently for signs of cold injuries and work in unheated areas cannot exceed 1 minute. They also use work-rest cycles at a recommended rate of a 10-minute break each hour, with more frequent breaks as the temperature decreases.

When the wind chills reach below minus 34, all lower priority outdoor work stops. Outdoor work is accomplished only after assessing risk and mission priorities, and any work is then performed under direct supervision. All outdoor work is suspended when the temperature drops below minus 48.

Photo by TSgt Timothy Psaledakis

The squadron's focus on "back to basics" in aircraft maintenance especially emphasizes cold-weather hazards during wintertime, said Lt Col James Howe, 319 AMXS commander.

"We stress the usage of proper full protection hardware that's available for de-icing operations and walking on the wings," Howe said.

Although winter conditions give the maintenance crews considerably more work and worries, planning often helps limit the exposure to the cold, Greene said. Still, there will be times when there is no avoiding the worst Mother Nature has to offer.

"When (on a cold day) we know an airplane won't leave until 4 p.m., the first thing I do is call the aerospace ground equipment shop for a heater, so we can work with the weather not even being a factor," Greene said. "But when the aircrew is already on the plane ready to launch, we have to get working immediately...I have someone call to get a heater as soon as possible."

"It's like an icebox when we first get here," said crew chief Airman 1st Class Jonathan Mullins. The squadron's high temporary-duty rate has made coping with weather conditions even more difficult.

"You come back from Turkey, where it's 85 degrees ... to here, where it's totally different," Greene said. "Then, you go to Base Y. So the weather operations change back and forth. It's much easier when you're here as the weather gradually changes. Going from here to the desert is a big factor."

All of these operational requirements make ORM in their daily operations critical. Considering basic flightline tasks in cold temperatures and high winds can be extremely hazardous if you don't weigh the benefits vs. the risks involved. However, for these airmen, by using the six step ORM process. They accomplish their mission, quickly, effectively, and safely.

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