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For U.S. Fighter Pilots And Their Crews, Coronavirus Has Radically Changed Intricate Routines



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Aerospace & Defense



A crew chief helps a 20th Fighter Wing F-16 pilot strap into his aircraft. PHOTO BY SENIOR AIRMAN KATHRYN REAVES, 20TH FIGHTER WING PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Every time Capt. Jonathan Lee walks to his F-16 to go fly at Shaw Air Force Base near Sumter, South Carolina, he's met by a crew chief.

The crew chief from the 77th Fighter Generation Squadron salutes and greets Capt. Lee and follows him up the ladder to the cockpit to help strap him into his parachute. Once secure, Lee confirms that he's ready to go and that his crew chief can climb down and pull the ladder away from the fighter. Just before he does so, Senior Airman Elquone Harris reaches out and shakes his pilot's hand.

That's the way it's always been done, right up to about March of this year. But since the onset of the pandemic, the handshake and the human touch have been put on hold.

"It's kind of upsetting," Harris admits. "On a normal day, we climb up the ladder, help them out and shake their hand. That's their last handshake until they come back."

The reality is that fighter pilots don't always come back, even from routine training missions. That last pre-flight handshake between the pilot of a single-seat fighter and crew chief is a small but meaningful ritual.

"That's the toughest 'don't do that' moment for me," Lee says.

There's now a long list of "don't do that" items for Air Force flight crews and maintainers, necessary concessions to a highly communicable sickness that could devastate

readiness without precautions. The 77th and other Air Force squadrons are flying comparable hours but there's much that doesn't compare.

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Combat Briefs and Sanitized Jets

The 77th FS (nicknamed The Gamblers) is now divided into an A team and a B team. One team flies Monday/Wednesday/Friday and the other on Tuesday/Thursday. Teams alternate this schedule. Just a few months ago, Captain Lee's flying day looked different.



The Gamblers ready for a sortie from Nellis AFB in Las Vegas during Red Flag 20-2 in March. PHOTO BY AIRMAN 1ST CLASS JACOB GUTIERREZ, 20TH FIGHTER WING PUBLIC AFFAIRS

He'd drive onto base at Shaw about two hours before his scheduled sortie, go to a mass briefing with 12 other squadron pilots, then break off into smaller flight sections of two to four people for a more detailed mission briefing.

Pilots chose whatever briefing rooms were free/convenient and upon finishing about an hour later, all 12 would head for the squadron flight desk for last-minute weather, aviation notices and aircraft specific information. They'd walk out to their jets, takeoff for the mission, return about 90 minutes later and then debrief for two to four hours.

"It's a lot different now," Lee says. "We're all wearing masks and when able, maintaining six feet of social distance."

There are no mass briefings, only small "combat style" briefs, usually with just a flight leader and wingman pair. "If I'm in a two-ship flight then I'm going to go to one briefing room and I'm going to stay in the same briefing room for the week."

Squadron spaces are constantly sanitized. When Lee and the other 77th pilots head out to the flight line, their flight gloves and helmets are already on. They stay six feet from their crew chiefs. Before climbing the ladder to the cockpit, Lee puts on his oxygen mask, "In order to prevent myself from breathing all over the cockpit."

Flight gloves don't offer the feel of bare fingers on the F-16's stick, throttle and instrument panel buttons (in the past many pilots cut the fingertips off their gloves) but they stay on to keep the cockpit sterile for the next pilot.

A little over 300 miles north at Langley AFB in Hampton, Virginia, Staff Sergeant Ian Ivey

of the 27th Aircraft Maintenance Unit (27th Fighter Squadron, 1st FW) cleans the cockpit of an F-22 Raptor wearing a mask and gloves. He uses a mixture of isopropyl alcohol and distilled water to sanitize the Raptor's control stick, throttles, displays and cockpit buttons. Sgt. Ivey is an F-22 crew chief and member of the Raptor Demonstration Team, which would have flown at five airshows by now were it not for the virus.



Staff Sergeant Ian Ivey of the 27th AMU prepares to launch an F-22 Raptor. NICHOLAS J. DE LA PENA, JOINT BASE LANGLEY-EUSTIS

Before getting to the Raptor Ivey's answered questions from security guards at Langley's gate to determine if he's entering the base for a mission-critical purpose. Working five days on and five days off, he's busy with computer-based training and reports while at home.

On arrival at the 27th FS hangar an expediter comes out of his office and yells out Ivey's assignment. He goes to a tool room with one other maintainer to collect sterilized tools and heads to the flight line.

"By the time you're out at your [work] spot, you've had almost no contact with anybody which is pretty crazy in this career," he says.

At Langley and Shaw, hand sanitizer and Lysol are everywhere, including by the

airplanes. Pilots do their pre-flight walk around but largely avoid touching surfaces. When Lee settles in the cockpit of his F-16, he does it alone, strapping in without assistance from Airman Harris. Lee says it's okay, he's fine strapping his parachute on himself.

The pace of flying at the 77th has stayed similar to pre-COVID levels. However, the training is local, mostly Basic Fighter Maneuvers (BFM). It's a far cry from the deployment to Nellis AFB, Nevada for the annual Red Flag exercises which the Gamblers made in early March. The squadron's F-16s are home and get maintenance each night.

"We're actually getting more time to fix the aircraft with the new flying schedule," Airman Harris says. "We get better fixes and more reliable aircraft."

There's No Gear Like Your Gear

For pilots and maintainers gear is personal, never more so than now. Pilots' g-suits, harnesses, helmets, and oxygen masks have always been dedicated to the individual. Handing gear over for sterilization between flights is vital.

Aircrew flight equipment personnel, who wear their own PPE, sterilize each piece. "I now take my helmet and mask to them to keep them sanitary," Lee explains. "It hasn't been a huge difference but it's necessary."

"We're not allowed to use our locker rooms," Sgt. Ivey says, "so when I go home, I go to my garage and take off all my equipment – my coveralls, whatever – and throw it right in the washer."

Like other crew chiefs, Ivey sanitizes his headset, reflector belt, and gloves with Lysol. He admits that his personal gear has never felt more "his." But he adds that after two months of working this way, the people in the 27th AMU are "in a groove."

The Raptor Demo Team still practices once a week so that the pilots and maintainers will be ready when airshows do resume. In fact, the Team recently flew a Raptor with two WWII P-51 Mustangs over Virginia Beach for a salute to frontline COVID workers.

Back at Shaw, Lee says the need to step to his airplane in full flight gear shouldn't be too much bother, even when the heat and humidity crank up. "As soon as I get the canopy down I can go 'Start 2' and get the [cockpit cooling] working so that's not too much of a problem."

Air Force squadrons are proving they can operate with less person-to-person contact daily but that doesn't make it pleasant. Ivey says he's talking more with his pilots on the radio before they taxi out for a sortie.

"There's a huge bond between the maintainers and the pilots. Not being able to shake his hand before he [closes the canopy] is a bummer."



An F-22 from the Raptor Demo Team in formation with two P-51 Mustangs in a Heritage Flight. [Full coverage and live updates on the Coronavirus](#) PHOTO BY NICHOLAS J. DE LA PENA, JOINT BASE LANGLEY-EUSTIS



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