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Lightning storms rage over the flight deck, lined with F/A-18s, of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS *John C. Stennis* as the ship transits the Persian Gulf. Boeing field technicians often accompany the crews on missions that can last up to 10 months and are used to working in violent weather.
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U.S. NAVY PHOTO



Whoaaa!

Boeing technicians often have to weather extremes. They are blown about on carrier decks, risk their lives in explosive war zones, and work in blistering desert heat or freezing arctic cold. But they wouldn't trade it for anything.

By **BOB BURNETT**

Heat, cold, wind, rain, mud, dust, danger. Boeing people sometimes work in the most inhospitable conditions.

You'll find them in every corner of the globe where winter's desiccating winds chill to the marrow and summer's pitiless dry heat sucks moisture from every pore. Where it's so hot they can't pick up a wrench without being burned, or so cold their breath freezes.

You'll find them in hostile environments everywhere, in developing countries, on and under the sea, and in dangerous war zones.

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The Air Force calls it Balad Air Base. The U.S. Army calls it Camp Anaconda. Boeing field service representatives Ed Joslin and Domingo Lopez-Soto remember the sprawling Air Base 40 miles north of Baghdad as “Mortaritaville,” a well-earned sobriquet from the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

They are among 600 Integrated Defense Systems field engineers, technicians and logisticians who support Boeing-built products at military units in far-flung places. When the units go to war, so do the field reps.

The heat of combat

“We lived in tents, ate MREs (meals ready to eat) and we took a lot of incoming rockets and mortars,” Ed Joslin says of his first visit to Balad as a member of an Army CH-47D Chinook helicopter battalion that helped capture the base from the Iraqis.

Soon after Joslin retired from the Army, Boeing hired him to be a Chinook field engineer. He returned to Iraq and experienced more incoming rounds, this time as a civilian. At Al Taji, only 16 miles north of Baghdad, a rocket struck the apron in front of the hangar where Joslin was working, damaging several aircraft and

vehicles. Another destroyed a trailer two trailers away from the one Joslin lived in, wounding its occupant.

“It bothers you, but you have to put it in the back of your mind and keep on working,” he says.

“We had mortar attacks on a daily basis, sometimes twice a day, sometimes three times,” says fellow field rep Domingo Lopez-Soto. “We wanted to continue supporting our customers, but we had to go to the bunkers and wait for the all-clear signal so we could continue with the mission.”

Shawn Bittner says, “These folks are sometimes making the same kinds of sacrifices as the military. They are living the lives of their customers.” Fifteen Boeing field reps are deployed to Al Asad Air Base in western Iraq supporting Marine Corps CH-46E Sea Knight helicopters and AV-8B Harrier II squadrons.

“In the summer it’s 110 degrees in the hangar,” says Bittner, who recently returned from a year in Al Asad and now leads the CH-46 Sustainment Technical Assistant Team. “Outside, it gets up to 137 degrees. We had to wear gloves to handle the tools.”

The Sea Knight’s primary mission is casualty evacuation. Keeping the helicopters ready to fly is not an option, Bittner says.

John Nicholson (left), Boeing ScanEagle site lead poses with two U.S. Marine Corps officers, as a sandstorm bears down on their ScanEagle launch area at Al Asad Coalition Forces Air Base in Iraq.

“People’s lives depend on it.”

Seul Kim, a logistics specialist, and Chuck Fiocoprile, a field service representative, are embedded with an AH-64D Apache Longbow helicopter battalion in Bagram, Afghanistan. Winter temperatures dip well below freezing, but by July they can expect searing heat, hordes of insects and sandstorms known as “one-hundred-day winds” that blanket everything in a talcum of grit and turn grease into an abrasive.

They work 12 hour days, seven days a week and sleep in their offices close to the flight line. “We’re available 24 hours a day,” says Fiocoprile. “Anytime an aircraft needs to go on a mission, we support it.”

Dave Caraballo says, “When it rains it gets really messed up. There’s so much sand and dirt and it all turns into this slushy mud that sticks to your shoes and gets so heavy you can hardly walk.”

Caraballo was the first Boeing field rep sent to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar to support the C-17 Globemaster III for the U.S. Air Force.

“We deploy wherever we are needed,” says Gus Urzua, vice president, Air Force Integrated Logistics at Integrated Defense

Systems. Besides Al Udeid, he said, field engineers are currently embedded with C-17 units in Ramstein, Germany, and Incirlik, Turkey, to support the Iraq and Afghanistan war efforts.

Two years ago, Boeing sent 15 technicians to Bagram to recover a damaged C-17. They spent 70 days in the desert heat making temporary repairs so the plane could return to Boeing’s Long Beach, Calif., factory for permanent repair and redelivery.

“It’s mandatory that you have water with you at all times,” says Tony Bentivegna, a logistics manager who has deployed three times to Al Dhafra Air Base, United Arab Emirates, with KC-10 Extender units. Boeing has been supporting airborne tankers at Al Dhafra since the war began almost five years ago.

“The best part is learning to appreciate the culture,” says Bentivegna.

Boeing people are helping the Army, Navy, and Marines fly the ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) from land bases in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as from ships offshore.

“They maintain it, they fly it, and they give the information to the military,” says Dave Boulton, Field Service program manager

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In the desert, searing heat and sandstorms can blanket everything with a talcum of grit, and turn grease into an abrasive.



Carrier flight decks are totally unprotected from the elements. Snow blankets the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS *Harry S. Truman* as crew members prepare for an ammunition onload. Boeing technicians, assigned to carriers, are familiar with such conditions.



U.S. NAVY PHOTO

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for Logistics Services at Integrated Defense Systems. ScanEagle is a low-cost Tier II UAV designed to gather intelligence and conduct long-endurance surveillance and reconnaissance missions.

Boeing also provides technical support to Air Force AC-130U gunships, versions of the C-130 Hercules modified by Boeing to incorporate side-firing weapons and sophisticated sensors and fire-control systems.

Serving at sea

Joe Punda and Mike “Monty” Montalbano are getting ready to go to sea – again.

They and other Boeing field representatives have been supporting F/A-18E/F Super Hornet squadrons since the Navy introduced the fifth-generation strike fighter to the fleet in 2001. When their squadrons deploy with a carrier air group, the field reps go too.

Punda, an airframe and power plant specialist, and Montalbano, an avionics and electronics specialist, are participating in squadron workups in preparation for their fourth deployment on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* since coming to Boeing

five years ago. Most cruises are for six months, but their first cruise on the *Lincoln* lasted a record 10 months. Their second deployment was extended to aid victims of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. “Being away from home is a way of life for me,” says Punda. “I’m used to it.”

“It’s what I signed up for,” agrees Montalbano.

They normally work 12-hour shifts. During flight operations, however, they are available 24/7. Although modern nuclear-powered carriers are air-conditioned, the giant hangar deck is drafty and the flight deck is totally unprotected from the elements. In 1998, when the *Lincoln* spent three months in the Arabian Gulf during the hottest summer on record, the flight deck reached 150 degrees Fahrenheit. In other parts of the world, crews may be shoveling snow from carrier decks.

Accommodations vary. Sometimes Punda and Montalbano are in a four-man stateroom with other civilian technicians. Sometimes they are in junior-officer or enlisted berthing areas with 15 or more men. They almost always have to share a washroom with dozens, even hundreds, of sailors. Because they are both retired chief petty officers, once in a while Punda and Montalbano find room in the ship’s chief petty officer quarters..

Going to the extreme with jetliners

Commercial Airplanes has more than 330 field service representatives throughout the United States and 143 locations abroad, providing direct onsite technical support to customer airlines.

The field service representatives are Boeing's first responders when a mechanical problem or mishap grounds a customer's airplane. If the problem can't be fixed with local help, the airline can call for an Airplane On Ground team. Boeing AOG teams are legendary for their swift actions. They will travel anywhere in the world on a moment's notice to help customers get their airplanes back into the air – often from remote locations with austere facilities.

"Our people have to be ready to go almost anywhere in the world on short notice," says Frank Santoni, director of Flight Operations and Commercial Airplanes' chief pilot. "Without them, we don't do our tests." Flight crews, engineers and ground technicians at Commercial Airplanes' Flight Test travel to the ends of the earth to find suitably unpleasant conditions for testing new jets. They endure wind chills of thirty below zero in central Alaska or eastern Montana and roast in the blistering heat of the Mojave Desert or the Australian Outback.

Sometimes, however, the most challenging conditions are right at home.

"Changing all four hydraulic pumps on the Large Cargo Freighter in the pouring rain at (Seattle's) Boeing Field can be tough," says Mike Manning, Flight Test supervisor.

Airport runways are usually aligned for predominant wind patterns. But the wind doesn't always cooperate, so every certification program requires testing in very high crosswinds.



PHOTO BY RON STEPHENS

Randy Black, Boeing logistics support specialist, stands alongside one of the AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters that he and field service representative Ron Stephens support at Camp Speicher, north of Baghdad. Two U.S. Army soldiers are seated in the rotorcraft.



A CH-47 Chinook heavy lifter transports vehicles into the field. Sand and heat present severe challenges to the technical crews who service both the aircraft and the vehicles.



PHOTO BY C/MPR DON BAILEY, U.S. NAVY

At left, the Boeing Sustainment Technical Assist Team, pictured at the Al Asad Coalition Forces Air Base in Iraq last year, inspects and reconstitutes worn and damaged CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters for the U.S. Marines. The team (from left), Cody Schlomer, Arron Williams, Jason Pittman, George Cruz, James Word, team lead Shawn Bittner, Roman Iwanski, and Chuck Heartsill, sometimes worked in temperatures topping 120 degrees.

Welcome to Keflavik, Iceland. "It's always windy and the two runways are perpendicular to each other," Santoni says. "We generally get a crosswind on one of them." Sometimes cold-weather testing can be accomplished on the same trip.

At Edwards Air Force Base in California's Mojave Desert, where braking tests are conducted, ground crews change worn tires in summer heat and winter winds.

But whatever the conditions Boeing employees love their jobs, find the work exciting and challenging and say that they wouldn't trade working in the field for anything. ■