

The Wrench Turner

After taking his chances on the "outside," a crew chief comes home

by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade
photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Career Field Stats

2A373A — Tactical Aircraft Maintenance

Duties: Services, inspects, prepares and maintains aircraft for mission readiness. Works with other maintenance specialties to keep aircraft in operation. Coordinates aircraft maintenance with flight crew and maintenance expeditors.

Civilian application:

Aircraft repair and maintenance for commercial aircraft. Also, former crew chiefs are working in a host of jobs that involve supervision, maintenance, scheduling, inspections and other skills.

There was a time when Staff Sgt. Jeff Cody traded Air Force blue for civilian khaki. Now he's back in blue, but it's a distinctly different blue than most Airmen wear. Sergeant Cody, 27, is a crew chief — a "wrench turner," he said — for the F-15 Eagle West Coast Demonstration Team at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. He wears dark blue fatigues with bold white stripes and the name of the unit emblazoned on the back and is following a path many believe sets him up for a bright career in the Air Force.

But four years ago, he had his doubts. In fact, he was so unsure the Air Force was the right fit that he left after his first enlistment to see what the civilian world had to offer.

"I guess I thought the grass might be greener," Sergeant Cody said. "I came back because I found out it doesn't really offer anything like what I have right here. This job is more fulfilling than anything I did on the outside, and I get to experience life in ways I never thought I'd be able to do when I was growing up."

When he graduated from high school in Mount Pleasant, Texas, he had a handful of choices, but really didn't have a vision for what he wanted to do. He worked for his father at a local cattle auction, went to community college and spent a lot of time driving around the small town of 13,000 in his Z-28 sports car.

Following Dad in the cattle business was part of the family tradition. Still, the world beyond Texas called him. In 1995, his mother died, leaving him "aimless." It was time to move out of Mount Pleasant.

"I think my father knew I wasn't going to be happy unless I got out and tasted something of life," he said. After talking to a recruiter, Sergeant Cody was "dead set" on joining the Navy until his father took him to the local Air Force recruiting office. A few months later, he was in basic training.

After technical training at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, he started

working on F-15s with the 53rd Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany. When the Air Force inactivated the squadron, he was re-assigned to Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, where he met his future wife and started to re-evaluate what an Air Force career would mean for a young family.

"Now I had a family to think about. I wasn't sure that the Air Force life was good for a family," he said.

He left the Air Force and started hunting for work while his wife went to school. A promising job prospect in Texas dried up, and he got a job delivering furniture in Idaho.

Eleven months later — after a series of jobs that included clearing hazardous waste from rail cars — he returned to the Air Force. He was reinstated at his former senior airman rank and assigned to Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Since then, the sergeant's career has been a whirlwind. Tours with Operations Noble Eagle and Enduring Freedom helped expand his experience with the F-15 until he felt confident enough to apply for the demonstration team.

Now he has the best of all worlds, he said. His family — including two young children — is stable and happy in Florida, and he gets to see the world traveling 90 days a year with

the demonstration team.

And he gets to work on something that has become his passion: The F-15.

"It's just such a sight to see an aircraft 500 feet above ground, twisting and turning and knowing I'm responsible for making sure that jet can do its job," he said. "Any crew chief can tell you, there's nothing like that feeling. That's something you're not going to get on the outside." ☺



Staff Sgt. Jeff Cody

F-15C crew chief, F-15 West Coast Demonstration Team, Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Years in Air Force: 7 (with an 11-month break in service)

Hometown: Mount Pleasant, Texas

Reason for joining: "I was dead set to join the Navy, but my father insisted I at least talk to the Air Force recruiter. I knew I wasn't doing much in Mount Pleasant."

Assignments: Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, 1996, technical training student; Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, 1996 to 1998, crew chief; Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, 1998 to 2000, crew chief; Eglin Air Force Base, 2001 to present, crew chief.

Coming up: Life on the road with the F-15 Eagle West Coast Demonstration Team.

The best thing about the job: "The feeling you get when you see your jet come back from a mission with the crew intact and the munitions delivered."