The Unsung Workforce

Civilians keep the homefront operating when Airmen deploy

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
opening photo by Tech. Sgt. Jeremy Lock

If the name "Quiet Professionals" wasn't already claimed by special operations, it could be used to describe the 141,000 other Air Force people heavily engaged in the war on terrorism.

They don't wear camouflaged uniforms, but blend into workplaces throughout the world. They don't typically deploy, but have died alongside Airmen at the hands of terrorist attacks. They are civilian employees, and they've stepped forward to fill the void when their colleagues deploy.

They include employees such as Cecil Hancher, who saw half the manpower disappear from the supply shop where he works when almost 500 Airmen from Ellsworth Air Force, S.D., deployed to support Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"The job had to be done, and that was our job to back them up if they had to go," said Mr. Hancher, one of 418 civilian employees at Ellsworth. "We just had to grin and bear it because we knew it was going to come."

And when that time came, Mr. Hancher and others were more than ready. They volunteered to take additional jobs at other shops to free the remaining Airmen so they could focus on more critical tasks. By training as a supply clerk in the deployment office, Mr. Hancher said it allowed more Airmen to be available to take on military-specific jobs such as handling hazardous cargo or weapons.

"There's a lot of can-do attitude here," Mr. Hancher said. He and other civilians are glad to take on the added workload because they want to "be a part of it."

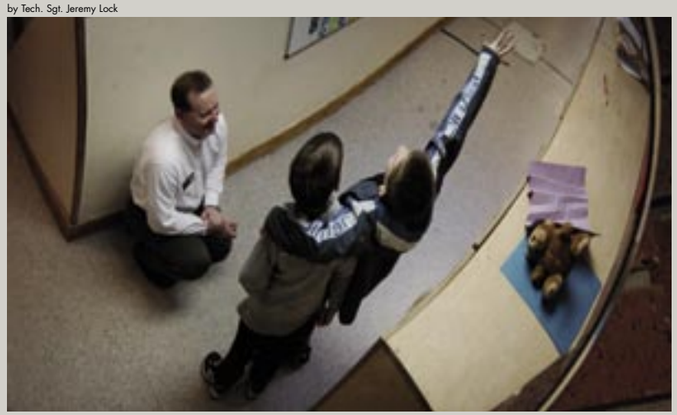
That same attitude is prevalent with the "Dirt Boys," said Timothy Scott, an engineering equipment operator and supervisor with the 28th Civil Engineer Squadron horizontal shop at Ellsworth.

"There hasn't been one complaint. We know that our job is to sustain the base when the troops aren't here," he said. Their absence can take its toll on the civilian workforce, he said, but it's a matter of "adapt and overcome" to get the job done.

"It's one team, one fight," he said. "It doesn't matter whether a

Everything from bombs to bolts *falls under the purview of Bill Pratt (right) as the chief of cargo movements at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England. He and Darren Watson, a hazardous cargo specialist, provide ongoing support for the global war on terrorism by moving equipment down range. When about 1,000 Airmen deployed from Lakenheath earlier this year, Mr. Pratt lost a large portion of his workforce along with it, but civilian employees gladly stepped in to do "more with less."*

by Tech. Sgt. Jeremy Lock



Matt Driver (left), youth center coordinator for Lakenheath, *stops to chat with two youth members about their weekend. Keeping kids happy isn't a job typically associated with the global war on terrorism; however, Mr. Driver said helping families cope with deployments is integral to the well-being of family members left behind. "The work we do has a positive influence in the kids' lives, which in turn impacts the overall Air Force mission."*

person wears a uniform. It's the same goal, the same mission. Everybody pitches in — it's the price of freedom."

And the beat goes on

Col. Neal McElhannon has reached the same conclusion at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, where about 1,000 of the 5,000 Airmen stationed there deployed earlier this year.

"Civilians at Lakenheath play a tremendous role," Colonel McElhannon said. He should know. About 40 percent of the 48th Mission Support Group he commands are civilians.

The group includes key elements to base survival such as civil engineering, security forces and logistics. But the colonel said "the beat goes on" even when the military is gone. Keeping things in step, he said, "falls to the people back at home, and those people happen to be civilians."

Although Colonel McElhannon has approved a generous amount of overtime during deployments to offset the manpower void, the key factor in making ends meet has been civilian volunteers who perform multiple jobs to help pick up the slack.

That includes Matt Driver, a youth center coordinator who said adapting to the war on terrorism has become necessary for him and most other fellow civilian employees.

"It was a different world at the first Gulf War, but the last three or four years, it's gotten crazy," said Mr. Driver, who's worked in services for 13 years. Before Sept. 11, 2001, he said the focus of the youth center was on developmental needs such as sports. But now it's shifted toward the emotional needs of younger children coping with the absence of a deployed parent. Mr. Driver said his job directly relates to the war on terrorism, "I think it's a great thing. It shows the integral role we play in the mission. There's a big job to be done, and I'm proud to be a part of it. I don't have to wear a uniform to be proud of being a part of the U.S. Air Force."

Lost age of innocence

Greg Magavero has observed changes in the world since the 1970s, when he started working for the Air Force maintaining missile guidance systems during the Cold War.

As chief of the network control center at Arnold Air Force Base, Tenn., Mr. Magavero said, compared with the Cold War, it's not as readily apparent to see how one fits into a global war on terrorism. Though the enemy is not so easily defined, he knows that doesn't make his job any less important.

"We do whatever it takes to keep our little piece of the Air Force infrastructure up and running," he said of the Arnold Engineering Development Center mission. That mission encompasses the most advanced and largest complex of flight simulation test facilities in the world.

It also has one of the smaller military populations with about 100 Airmen. They work alongside approximately 200 Department of Defense civilians and 2,400 contract employees. Although it only had five of its Airmen deployed in April, those numbers can be deceiving, said Ron Vance, a civilian in the military personnel flight. With one Airman deployed and another on temporary duty, Mr. Vance found himself dealing with personnel issues he hadn't felt since he retired as a master sergeant in 1987.

"It's been hectic the last four to five months," said Mr. Vance, who manages the casualty assistance, survivor benefits and Air Force Aid Society programs. "Losing six out of 100 is like losing 100 out of a 1,000-man unit as far as work is concerned.

"Some days you don't leave exactly on time, but you've got to do what you can or everything will fall through the cracks," Mr. Vance said.

But that's OK, he said, because he understands how he fits into the big picture.

"If you're Air Force, you're going to be involved in some way, shape or form even if your everyday duties aren't directly related. No matter what you do, you support the overall mission," Mr. Vance said. And that scenario isn't likely to change in the foreseeable future.

"It's one team, one fight."

courtesy photo

An Arnold Engineering Development Center mechanic *discusses engine testing with a KC-135E pilot from the Alaska Air National Guard. Civilians — the majority of the workforce at Arnold Air Force Base, Tenn. — are joined with Airmen in the global war on terrorism through their contribution and development of practically every one of the nation's top priority aerospace programs.*

by Staff Sgt. Joanna Hensley

Tim Scott doesn't wear the uniform anymore, *but that doesn't make him any less of an Air Force team member engaged in the war on terrorism. As an engineering equipment operator and supervisor at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., he adopted a philosophy of "adapt and overcome" to keep the mission moving.*