Best Practice

Turning a Bucket of Bolts Into Beauty

By AOCM(AW/NAC) James Thompson

We had been operating on all cylinders and at full speed for several months, completing those buzzword exercises that every squadron hears near the end of an inter-deployment training cycle (IDTC): TSTA, COMPTUEX, Fallon, and JTFEX. We now were combat ready and looked forward to the scheduled deployment that would take us into the fight.

Everyone had their eyes set on the upcoming pre-deployment leave period, but we had one minor problem: Aircraft transfers and inspections still were scheduled before getting underway. Working aggressively with our wing, we finally identified the aircraft and set a plan in motion. As the maintenance master chief, I had to make sure the arriving aircraft were inspected and all the scheduled maintenance was done before embarking for parts unknown.

One aircraft came directly from Sikorsky after a long-term overhaul, and the other one came from a command that transferred it before they decommissioned. The receipt inspections would take forever—no corporate knowledge existed about the aircraft's past. In other words, we basically were starting from scratch. With cruise imminent and our backs against the wall, we set out to do what we do best. We would make it happen.

We set a target date of two weeks per aircraft to complete the aircraft acceptance, rebase special inspections, rebuild the aircraft, and complete the ultimate and dreaded "A" profile FCF. The first hurdle was to get the multi-volume ADBs and logbooks up to date. With invaluable assistance from the SPAWAR NALCOMIS team in Norfolk, we found the last valid data for the BUNOs in question and had the aircraft "pushed" into our system.

With the aircraft now uploaded, the maintenance chiefs activated tiger teams and let them off the leash. Before long, we had taken two helicopters that once were ugly shells and looked like hangar queens, and had turned them into something that more resembled high-performance fighting machines. We had brought them back to life.

With the first leave period ending and my wrench-turners ready to run out of the hangar and start their own leave, it now was paramount for everyone involved to sit down and go over each MAF. We needed to check the workload and make sure the entire maintenance department was on the ball and the aircraft were safe.

The team was jubilant, and as leave sections crossed paths, they gave each other high-fives at the hangar door.

Holding true to form, the second group picked up where the first one had left off. The aircraft were brought to life, and system checks were running smoothly. Pilots were champing at the bit to take the new chariots for a spin around the block. With all the paperwork done, our efforts were about to pay off. The books were read, and the aircraft were set up for ground-vibration analysis.

Minutes later, the aircraft were "ground checks complete" and ready for forward flight. All the last-minute items had been checked and crosschecked, and the aircraft were released safe for flight.

As the flight line slowly filled with eager and nervous squadron members, the hard-working line rats signaled for engine starts and rotor engagement. With rotors slowly building up speed, the aircraft seemed to leap to life. I watched with pride as the pilots signaled up and ready. Ever so slowly, the aircraft crawled out of the chocks. Looking around, I saw half the squadron watching intently as the helos lifted into a stable hover and began to break in the new engines and gearboxes.

Once out of sight, we manned the base radio. With the clock hands ticking slowly, we waited for the pilots to call. It seemed like an eternity, but the radio finally crackled to life, and maintenance control went deathly silent. After the desk chief acknowledged his call, the pilot stated, "616 on deck in 10 minutes, FCF complete, up bird!" An hour later, the radio again cackled to life with the call, "615 inbound, pro complete, up bird". Smiles abounded. It was time to sit back and reflect on everything we had accomplished.

ORM is not just three letters in the alphabet. Communicating, training, and maintaining attention to detail always pays off. Each work center talked with maintenance control, and that was key to the plan's success. Each work center was given a workload report to devise a plan for accomplishing all their tasks. They met with the build chief, who looked at each plan, offered suggestions to help refine it, and then worked each one into a master plan. The crews kept ideas flowing among themselves, allowing us to make changes to the schedule without severely affecting other shops.

This particular event reminded us that thorough planning leads to good execution. Teamwork and camaraderie were evident in taking on a tremendous task, with little room for error. Instilling a sense of ownership and insisting on by-the-book maintenance became the standard, and that approach turned two hangar queens into productive fleet assets.

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