

Previewing...



Air traffic controllers direct the dance

by Airman 1st Class Kenneth W. Norman
97th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs

10/18/2011 - **ALTUS AIR FORCE BASE, Okla.** -- An airfield is a continuous dance of aircraft, personnel and vehicles. Sometimes this dance is a slow two-step and other times it is a fast paced Salsa. Working high above the ground are airfield choreographers, making sure that every move each dancer makes is correct. These rhythm coordinators are better known as air traffic controllers.

The men and women of the 97th Operations Support Squadron air traffic control flight play a key role in the everyday mission at Altus AFB. They are constantly watching every aircraft entering our airspace, guiding vehicles and personnel moving on the flightline, ensuring they all arrive to their destination safely.

"We in the tower control five miles in all directions up to 3,500 feet and are averaging 114,000 annual operations" said Senior Master Sgt. Thomas E. Hensley, 97th OSS tower chief controller. "Here at Altus we support the training mission and real world missions.

Overall as air traffic controllers, our goal is to provide safe and expeditious air traffic control to all users of the airspace."

The tower controls anywhere from 100 to 250 aircraft a day.

"We get a little more traffic because we are a training base and they are flying every day here," Hensley said. "During a busy period a tower controller could be working six or seven aircraft at one time, which can be very complicated because we have three runways. With three runways and all the different tactical procedures we train here it is very complicated, but our controller training program is a yearlong, so they are ready for it."

Air traffic controllers spend 16 weeks at Keesler AFB, Miss., for technical training and then spend anywhere from eight months to a year doing on-the-job training, working to earn their five-level rating and Federal Aviation Administration certification.

For Air Force air traffic controllers, they must not only be very familiar with a 700-page book of laws, rules and regulations that all FAA certified controllers must know, but also be familiar with all AF instructions for their career field.

"The biggest challenge is staying on top of all the rules because they are frequently changing so you have to stay at the top of your game and stay current with all the regulations that come out," said Staff Sgt. J.W. Fair, 97th OSS air traffic control journeyman. "There are tons of rules to memorize and you can't break rules up here, because if you break rules it can cost lives."

Fair says he chose this career field because of the sense of accomplishment it gives him.

"[Air traffic controlling] is a lot more active than my last job," Fair said. "You participate in a lot throughout the day and when the day is said and done and every plane is landed safely you feel like you have actually done something constructive."

As the endless airfield dance continues, air traffic controllers keep up with the tempo and work to get everyone where they need to go safely, this is one of the reasons air traffic controlling can be a very rewarding job.



ALTUS AIR FORCE BASE, Okla. – Airman 1st Class Casey J. Noone, 97th Operations Support Squadron air traffic control apprentice, watches from the air traffic control tower as a C-17 Globemaster III takes off Oct. 13, 2011. Noone was working the local control traffic position in the tower and testing to earn his 5- skill level, while his supervisor listened to his communications with pilots and other personnel and graded him. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Kenneth W. Norman / Released / 97th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs)

"You are protecting all of the pilots who probably have families, who rely a lot upon what you say and your guidance to keep them safe in the air," Fair said. "I think at the end of the day the lives that you have in your hands is incredibly rewarding. It can be nerve racking and stressful when it is really busy, but more than anything it is really rewarding."