

Quick thinking saves Eagle

Staff Sgt. Celena Wilson
Staff Writer

The quick thinking and reaction of two 379th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chiefs prevented the loss of an F-15 Strike Eagle here recently. Their ability to get the bird back into the fight was recognized May 16.

Staff Sgt. Victor Babuta and Senior Airman James Clark, both stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., received the April Flightline Safety Award of Distinction from Brig. Gen. Ted Kresge, 379th AEW Commander, for their actions that took place April 16. Under the fighter sunshade, the two Airmen recalled the events of that day.

Airman Clark was assigned as the crew chief for that aircraft and Sergeant Babauta was assigned to the Strike 1 Expediter. According to the Airmen, when the aircraft was taxiing in, the aircrew reported a right hydraulic pump light illuminated indicating a possible problem. After the aircraft was parked, Airman Clark began running his recovery checklist and Sergeant Babauta inspected the suspected problem area.

"I was able to identify that the hydraulic pump seemed to be overheated. I also saw smoke and smelled fumes within the (Airframe Mounted Accessory Drive) bay," Sergeant Babauta said. "I realized the engine needed to be shut down immediately."

As he started to tell Airman Clark to shut down the engine, they heard a loud pop and saw a flash fire escape from the aircraft. The Airmen quickly shut down the engine and started putting out the fire. Sergeant Babauta prepared the fire bottle and handed the hose to Airman Clark, who went under the aircraft to the point of the fire. Once the fire was out, the crew could safely evacuate the aircraft.

Within a few hours of the mishap, maintenance crews including Sergeant Babauta and Airman Clark, began repairing the damage. The damage was estimated to be about \$385,000, but the goal was to return the aircraft to duty as soon as possible.

"Stateside, since we are in more of a training mindset, most aircraft may sit for a couple of days during the investigation," Airman Clark, a Rockmart, Ga., native said. "It also depends on the extent of the damage or waiting for parts to get in."

"Here we were able to get the damaged parts replaced and the aircraft was considered mission capable within 24 hours of the incident," Sergeant Babauta, a Yona, Guam native. "It took about 18 to 19 man hours to get the damage repaired, but we wanted to get that aircraft back in the air doing what it was made to do: patrolling over our Army and Marine troops and putting bombs on target. Our upper supervision supported us in getting the work done to get this aircraft back up in the air."

"The quick and determined actions of Sergeant Babauta and Airman Clark not only prevented serious and extensive damage to a \$44 million aircraft, but also prevented probable serious



Photo by Staff Sgt. Celena Wilson

Staff Sgt. Victor Babauta (left) and Senior Airman James Clark, 379th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chiefs, inspect the belly of an F-15 Strike Eagle Wednesday. Both Airmen were recognized with the April Flightline Safety Award of Distinction for their actions taken to save an F-15 during a flash fire April 16.

injury or death to our most valuable asset, Air Force personnel," said Capt. Dwight Minnick, 336th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Unit Officer in Charge.

When looking back, both Airmen thought about how much worse the outcome could have been.

"With all the fumes and gas in that area, the damage could have been so much more extensive," Airman Clark said. "It could have spread throughout the rest of the aircraft or to other aircraft parked nearby. At that point, training, instinct and adrenaline just kicked in. It all just happened so fast there was no time to think except getting that fire out."

"When I thought about it afterwards, about how close a live bomb was next to this fire," Sergeant Babauta said. "Everything has a certain temperature at which it can ignite and if we hadn't reacted as quickly, that bomb could have blown, taking out the aircraft, the ones next to it and everyone around it. It could have been a lot worse, but we reacted quick enough to keep the damage to a minimum."

According to the investigation report, the cause of the fire was attributed to an internal pump failure causing the pump to overheat and igniting the fumes in the bay.

What started in a flash was doused just as quickly when the instinct and training of two Airmen keep the Eagle flying.