

Life line

From checking flight helmets to parachutes, the Life Support team helps keep aircrews safe

By Adam Tischler and photos by Rich Rau



PHOTOS: (Above) Van Miller, left, and Tom Metcalf, technicians on the Flight Operations Life Support team with Boeing Test & Evaluation, inspect a parachute. **(Insets, from left)** Ryan Blassie, Aviation Life Support technician, tests a flight helmet and reviews proper fitting of a parachute harness on colleague Nathan Hanson, in flight suit.

Standing in the St. Louis parachute shop, Van Miller makes a quip that reveals a sense of humor built on a singular truth that he and his teammates hold closely—they are the last line of defense for Boeing aircrew.

“We’re always the last one to let you down,” Miller said with a chuckle.

The Flight Operations Life Support team with Boeing Test & Evaluation has its fingerprints, literally, across the organization. If there is a parachute, flight suit or helmet being used by aircrew, Life Support inspects and maintains it. The team teaches training for aircraft rescue and firefighting, and it supports aircrews at air shows and demonstrations around the globe.

“It’s amazing where we go,” Miller said. “That makes the job exciting as well, but it’s a lot of work.”

This team doesn’t mind the hard work, though. As Miller inspects a parachute

alongside Life Support technician Tom Metcalf, their unwavering focus speaks to the intensity of the task. Lives are at stake. Every inch of the parachute is critical.

“With us, we need to make sure it’s done and done right,” Metcalf said. “The professionalism is at an all-time high.”

The scrutiny poured into every piece of equipment, and the standard this team adheres to, comes from the heart, not just best practices and procedures.

“There hasn’t been a day that I haven’t come to work and loved my job,” Miller said. “We know that we’re responsible for them and we’re proud of it.”

They aren’t just keeping equipment safe; they’re keeping their friends and colleagues safe. The aircrews and Life Support teams share a bond that can only come from trust.

“They’re in lock step with us,” said Dave Desmond, chief pilot for Tactical Aircraft. “I can’t speak more highly of any

team that I work with in Flight Operations.”

Metcalf, Miller and other members of the Life Support team also spend a lot of time and effort preparing for air shows. It’s a job that never gets old, Metcalf explained.

“All the effort that you put in preparing to go, the travel you’re doing, the hard work and sweat to get ready, the nervous butterflies you have in your stomach, and no matter how many times you’ve done it before, you can’t wait to see your work,” he said.

Their work sometimes includes outfitting and training customers for demonstration flights.

“When we see that smile on a VIP’s face and the thumbs up,” Metcalf said, “you get satisfaction knowing that you helped make him or her safe and happy.” ■

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