

SHAW AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. (AFPN) -- Pilots from Shaw Air Force Base are now being fitted with the new Attenuating Custom Communication Earpiece System, which clarifies communication and provides better hearing protection than they currently receive.

The Attenuating Custom Communication Earpiece System, or ACCES, earphone is the shape of the pilots' inner ear cavity, which blocks out all ambient noise, said 2nd Lt. Chris Reichlen, a 20th Aerospace Medicine Squadron aerospace physiologist.

"Right now pilots use foam ear plugs for hearing protection," he said. "Their communication radio goes on after the earplug is inserted and the pilots have to really turn the volume up to hear."

"The device will significantly reduce the surrounding noise the pilot hears in the cockpit during a flight," said Capt. Jeromy Guinther, a 77th Fighter Squadron life support officer. "With this advantage, communicating on the radios, which can be very challenging, will be greatly enhanced. It will also increase the pilots' comfort level and provide for greater protection against hearing loss, which is always a risk on the flightline."

Right now, only pilots are getting geared up with the ACCES, but hopefully down the line the maintainers can get them as well, Lieutenant Reichlen said.

"In order for the pilots to get ACCES, we have to do a custom imprint of every pilot's inner ear," the lieutenant said. "We started pouring impressions about two weeks ago. We started with the 55th Fighter Squadron, then the 77th FS and now we are getting molds from the 79th Fighter Squadron pilots."

The impressions are sent to Westone Laboratories in Colorado Springs, Colo., where they cast it and build an ear impression from a different material, Lieutenant Reichlen said. They build the ACCES earphone and send it back within 30 days.

"I have not yet worn the device personally, but they come very highly recommended from pilots at other installations and those who have tried them out," Captain Guinther said. "They say the difference is phenomenal. Comfort is much better and the ability to hear is unmatched. With ACCES, pilots have to turn radio volumes nearly all the way down because they can hear the radios so well, whereas now, we pretty much have the radios cranked up to full blast all the time."

The ACCES earpiece along with other equipment needed costs approximately \$468 each and we will have about 175 for our first order, Lieutenant Reichlen said.

"We will put the order in at the beginning of the new fiscal year in October and expect our pilots to be wearing ACCES in early November," the lieutenant said.