

21 Days In The Life OF AN AIR REFUELING CREW



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Navigator KB-29 44- 83999

It was the fall of 1956, about a year after the 420th Air Refueling Squadron was assigned to RAF Station Sculthorpe, England. At that time we were a tactical air refueling squadron assigned to NATO. Our mission was to support U.S. Air Force tactical operations in Europe.

RAF Station Sculthorpe was located in the English countryside, in Norfolk County about 90 miles north of London. At Sculthorpe, we had ten B-29 bombers that had been converted into aerial tankers. The guns and the bomb racks had been taken out of the aircraft and refueling tanks had been installed in the bomb bays. They were called KB-29s.

Each of the KB-29s were assigned a crew of eight: an aircraft commander (pilot), a copilot, a navigator, a flight engineer, a radio operator, a radar operator, a boom operator, and a scanner (a boom operator trainee). Our crew was designated as crew A-2.

The second crew in the "A" flight had five planes. We were: Joe Rowen, Aircraft Commander; Pete Orpeza, Flight Engineer; Bart O'Keeffe, Navigator; Sam Crawford, Radio Operator; Jim Lowry, Radar Operator; Holis Britt, Boom Operator; and Bott, Scanner. We were assigned to aircraft 83999 with Walter Jansen as our crew chief.

I don't remember who our co-pilot was at the time. We had several over this time period. Joe Rowen was a natural born pilot and a very good instructor.

Whenever a co-pilot needed special attention he was assigned to our crew. This could have been when he was ready to check out with his own crew and needed someone who could just sit



back and watch him work, or perhaps it was someone who needed special attention. Our crew educated good pilots. I remember a few times when our airplane was in a difficult position and Joe Rowen would just lean back, look over at the co-pilot, and say, "Well, what are you going to do with it?" Most aircraft commanders would be grabbing the controls.

Our routine missions were in support of F-84F fighter planes that were stationed in Europe, mostly in England and in Germany. These planes had refueling capabilities and would go to the gunnery / bombing ranges in Morocco, North Africa for their training. Our routine mission, was to go down about half way with them. Near Bordeaux, in Southwestern France, we would refuel them and they would continue on to the gunnery / bombing range. The fighter planes would go down for a two week training session. We would refuel them on the way back and refuel the next group going down.

Our routine mission would start with a 3 a.m. wakeup call. For some reason that still escapes me, our usual refueling time was about 10 a.m. It took us about 6 hours to get that airplane woken up, pressure checked, get it in the air and get down to Bordeaux. In a routine mission we would then land at Bordeaux. As there were no military housing facilities at Bordeaux, we would spend the night at a downtown hotel. For reasons I don't know, they would put the officers up at one hotel and the enlisted men at another.

This all went along well. Ourselves and possibly another crew or two on the same mission would find ourselves at a hotel in downtown Bordeaux maybe once every month or six weeks. We got to know the town, its restaurants, bars, marketplace and sightseeing tours. It was our kind of place. Then our State Department and the French Government had some kind of falling out. Anyway, the word came down, "No more overnight stops in Bordeaux. Emergency landings only. Return to Sculthorpe after each mission".

Getting up at 3 a.m., hauling fuel all the way to Bordeaux, pulling our refueling mission and getting back to Sculthorpe made for a very long day. An after dark landing with minimum fuel made it even more difficult. This went on for two or three months. Crew A-2 began to hatch a plan. We wanted to see our old haunts in Bordeaux, and after all those long missions we deserved an overnight stay. We would pull our next mission, give the aircraft a through examination and most probably find a reason to declare an emergency and land in Bordeaux. We planned a two or three day stay.



Next came the execution of the plan. It's no easy job getting a suitcase full of clothes out of the house for a mission that was scheduled to be out and back the same day. Of course, we had to take crew chief Walt Jansen along with us as the aircraft would require some care while it was on the ground in Bordeaux. It quickly became an open secret among the enlisted men that something was up. We had five or six ground crew personnel who wanted to go. We wound up taking three of four. We got everyone and everything on board. Off to Bordeaux as scheduled and pulled off our refueling mission as planned. Then we came over Bordeaux, gave the aircraft a through inspection, and sure enough an emergency causing condition existed, right on schedule. We declared an emergency and landed in Bordeaux. Surely it would take two days to fix it.

Now comes something I'm not too sure about. The secrets are known only to flight engineers and crew chiefs. As a navigator, I was not supposed to know about the detailed intricacies of a KB-29. Anyway, it seems that if someone should pull a cannon plug out of the aircraft engine analyzer, cut a certain pin off of the cannon plug and reinsert it, then the engine analyzer would register a "No Fly" condition until someone put on a new cannon plug. Every resourceful flight engineer and crew chief had an extra cannon plug in his kit bag.

Two or three days in Bordeaux, back to our favorite haunts. I think the military calls it crew rest and relaxation. Even our favorite waiter wondered where we had been. Three days later we had spent most of our money and were ready to head home. Miraculously someone found the malfunctioning cannon plug.

The hotels were checked out of, bags were packed and loaded on the aircraft and we were headed for home. As we taxied out, we got a call from the control tower. "Return to base operations for a message". The message was from 420th operations: "Pull another refueling mission from Bordeaux". We had a real problem though. We had blown a tire while we were taxing back to base operations. Someone else would have to pull that mission.

In addition to that, someone would have to bring us down a new tire. If I remember right, they had to bring us down a whole set of wheels as there were no adequate tire repair facilities at Bordeaux. This trip was the signal to another crew for another party.

There was no shortage of volunteers. They had to take a tank out of a bomb bay on a KB-29 to make room for the wheels. The crew bringing the wheels were going to stay and fix our plane and we were going to take their aircraft back to Sculthorpe. We were stuck for a couple more days. The enlisted men had a real problem. They had not told anyone before, but they had had a falling out with the hotel management where they had been staying and had pulled a prank as they left. They couldn't go back there. Rowen said he would try to get them into the officers hotel, which he did.

The crew bringing the wheels down stayed at the same hotel where we were staying. They were ready for their night on the town. Jim Lowry, our radar operator, and I were sharing a room on the fourth floor, which was the top floor of the hotel. The rest of the two crews were scattered around the hotel. Two enlisted men from the other crew also had rooms on the fourth floor, down the hall from where Jim and I were staying. About 7:30 or 8:00 the next morning, Jim and I were packing to go back to Sculthorpe. We had our door open when a maid came running down the hall, shouting, "Fumar. Fumar." French for "fire". Jim and I rushed down the hall and into the room where the two enlisted men had been staying. The room was empty, but there was a water soaked pillow smoldering in the bathtub. The maid pulled the fire alarm.

It seems that one of the two men had been smoking in bed and had caught the pillow on fire. They put the pillow in the bathtub and turned the water on. Then, with the fire apparently out, they went back to sleep. Early the next morning they went out sightseeing and the pillow began to smoke again.

The fire department arrived. Amid much excitement, Jim and I leaned over the balcony on the fourth floor and watched the whole bit. It

seemed that there was no fire hose connection on the fourth floor. The only connection was in the hotel lobby. With much shouting, waving and gesturing, the fire department spread hose from the lobby up the stairway to the fourth floor. When they got it turned on the water barely came out of the hose. It was like the keystone cops.

Then the gendarmes showed up. They were serious. They were looking for those Americans that had set fire to this hotel. Setting fire to a hotel in France was a serious offense, up to five years in a French prison. Other members of the our crews set out looking for their buddies on the sight seeing tours. Luckily, our enlisted men found their buddies before the gendarmes did.

The so-called offenders were whisked out to the airport and loaded on the 420th aircraft that had been used to bring the wheels down to us. The aircraft departed immediately, headed directly into international waters around France and back to England.

Crew A-2 was still stuck in Bordeaux, but this time with some wheels for their aircraft. It took a couple of days to get it fixed and the aircraft ready to go again. By this time we had been gone for over a week and wished we were home.

Getting the wheels on and departing from there was uneventful. But wait, we weren't home yet. About an hour out of Bordeaux, we lost an engine. It blew a jug, swallowed a valve or something like that. We shut the engine down.

A check of the weather showed it to be bad. Sculthorpe was down to near minimum landing conditions. We decided not to try it on three engines. We were directed to go to Chateroux, a base with maintenance facilities near Toulouse, France. Chateroux was bright and sunny and we touched down there without incident. However, our troubles were not over. The engine that we had blown was some sort of an experimental engine and the factory representative wanted to look at it before we did anything. It was another five days away from home.

By the time that the factory representative arrived, inspected the engine, and we had a new one put on another ten days had elapsed. All told we had been gone for twenty one days.

