

KB *Departure*



Squadron Now operational with

**Ten KB-29 Aerial Refueling Aircraft
From Mules, Missiles and Men**

By James L. Brewer,
Pilot and Aircraft Commander
420th Air Refueling Squadron Adjutant
1954-1958

One by one our aircraft began to arrive until we had our authorized ten. They were World War II B-29's, which had been converted to provide in-flight refueling to bombers and fighters equipped to receive it. B-29's so converted were designated KB-29's the "K" signifying aerial tankers. Fuel was transferred through a telescoping, flying boom extending out of the tail. The boom was normally stowed upward (to clear the ground during take-off and landing) but the boom operator, from the former tail-gunner position, lowered it and "flew" it to meet and lock onto the receptacle of the other aircraft, telescoping it in or out to match the distance.

It required coordination between the tanker pilot, flight engineer and boom operator as well as the "receiver" pilot. Jet fuel for the receivers was carried in two huge multilayered, reinforced leak-proof nylon tanks, one of which almost completely filled all the space in each of the two big bomb bays. it was vital that pilots and flight engineers knew everything there was to know about



every system or piece of equipment on the airplane in order to make quick life-saving decisions when things went wrong in flight.

These airplanes had been well worn during World War II then converted to KB-29's and almost worn out by Strategic Air Command (until then the only command to operate tankers), and then given to us third-hand because SAC now had new KC-135's (tanker version of the Boeing 707). Even when new, B-29's had been crew-killers.

In the Air Force the first pilot of a flight crew is called the Aircraft Commander or 'AC'. Since I was slated to be one of the ten AC'S, I was eventually given my own airplane and crew of seven other than myself. All my crew members had just completed initial training in their specialty except my senior boom operator, S/Sgt Cecil "Hams" Harris. Hams was a hell-raiser off duty but absolutely top notch in doing his job. I would soon become Senior Flight Commander and lead crew in the squadron, having my pick of all crew members.

Harris and my Flight Engineer, Tech Sergeant Howard Mathews, would fly with me through thick and thin.

Although we had an excess of young co-pilot types we did not have enough pilots with the experience to become AC'S. I remembered my good friend at Greenville, South Carolina, Eldon J. "Mac" Mc Cure. He had come back on active duty during the Korean War and was serving somewhere as a Captain. After clearing it with my CO, I tracked him down and persuaded him to come into our squadron. With Mac's approval I proceeded to call Major White at Ninth Air Force and arranged transfer. Mac worked out Fine and was well liked by all. I later found that I had strongly mixed feelings about bringing him in.

I flew with my crew as much as possible, usually at night or on weekends. It was important to weld them into a safe, dependable team as soon as possible. I would often work all day in my office, fly with them all night and then complete another day of work in the office when we landed. I could never sleep on an airplane. I was not about to doze off with that old airplane and a green crew. Many years later I ran across a group picture and was shocked to see how thin and haggard I looked at the time.

The time came to move our unit to Sculthorpe RAF Station, England. It would be a major job. In addition to the flight crews the ten KB-29's would be packed with aircraft maintenance people and key staff. All others would follow by ship.



Top: Pack and gear laid out, ready to step aboard and depart the United States of America in route to Sculthorpe, England.

Middle: A C-124 is loaded with crates containing all necessary equipment to support the 420th Air Refueling Squadron.

Bottom: All 10 KB-29's are prepared for the flight overseas. Fuel tanks are topped off and systems are double checked.

Journey Across The Sea

by William Dietzel, Ground Crew

The order of the day was to pack all of the equipment necessary to support 165 members of the squadron and Ten KB-29s Air Refueling Tankers. We built crates then packed and loaded them on four C-124s.

This was the last night before the entire 420th Air Refueling Squadron would re-locate across the Atlantic to a new home. It was time for a departure party. We all had one hell-of-a good time.

After the party that evening, the 420th Air Refueling Squadron was ready to leave the United States of America and travel to Sculthorpe, England.

Time to head out

0700 Hours: The ground crews Pre-Flight their aircraft for an 1100 Hours take off. Their aircraft must be in the best running condition possible. The fuel tanks are filled to the maximum capacity. I am assigned as part of the ground crew on Captain Lightner's aircraft KB-29 44-69674.

0900 Hours: The flight crew arrives and pre-flights the airplane. The crew members line up for parachute inspection. Captain Lightner briefs the flight crew on the route and weather conditions: The path will be Alexandria AFB, LA onto Goose Bay, Labrador then to Newfoundland across the North Atlantic ocean to Sculthorpe RAF Station, England.

1100 hours: The fire guards stand by as the pilots begin to start their massive engines. Captain Gerald Lightner leans out of the cockpit window, rotating his fingers in a circular motion. The big propeller on number one engine begins to turn. It spins over and over, faster and faster, and finally comes to life with a roar. The other three engines follow and the noise level is intensified. The snarl of four engines

turns into a continuous deafening hum. All ten KB-29s roll out slowly from their assigned places.

1115 Hours: Captain James L Brewer, aircraft commander of the lead KB-29 aircraft is seated next to the Squadron Commander of the 420th Air refueling Squadron Colonel Sheffield.

Brewers calls out with a crackle: "Alexandria tower this is KB-29 Command Ship 68700, requesting taxi instruction to the active runway for take off".

"You are cleaned to active runway 36 Altitude setting 2990 winds North by North West at 10 knots. You are cleared to the active for take off 68700" returns the tower.

The KB-29s line up in position for take off. With great pride one of the pilot windows slides open and a Confederate Flag slides proudly upward out of the cockpit window. Following the lead aircraft the squadron of KB-29s move out and form a line for the active runway take off.

"Alexandria Tower this is KB-29 niner-six-seven-four, ready for take off" Captain Lightner signals.

"Aircraft niner-six-seven- four, you are next in line for take off, winds 10 knots North by North West, Altimeter setting at two-niner-niner. KB-29 six-seven-four you are cleared to taxi onto run way thirty six and hold your position" the tower replies.

"Roger that tower, niner six seven four, holding on active."

The command KB-29 with Captain Brewer at the controls pulls into position on the runway. The giant aircraft engines go to full power. The prop wash can be felt moving across the aircraft surface as the R-3350's producing 2200 horsepower turn the great 16 foot propellers The aircraft begins to move down the runway.



Party Time Uncle Sam's Bar, Alexandria, LA.
"We all had one hell of a of good time."

When we die we leave behind us all that we have and take with us all that we are.

“Niner-six-seven-four you are cleared for take off and cleared for a left hand turn out.”

“Niner-six-seven-four rolling” Captain Lightner replies.

Captain Lightner calls over the internal intercom to the flight engineer “Sgt. Sunden take her to full power”.

“Yes Sir” Sunden replies.

He turns the booster pumps to high, moves the mixture controls to full rich, places his hand on the throttles and opens the engine to full power. Captain Lightner pushes on all four throttle controls as the KB-29 begins to roll down the runway. The enormous silver beast begins to move faster; fifty, seventy-five, one hundred miles per hour. Captain Lightner feels the aircraft become lighter and pulls back ever so lightly. 9674 is airborne.

“Gear up” Captain Lightner calls to the Co-pilot. They climb to 2500 feet, make a tight turn to the left and after a short time level the aircraft out. One after the other the 420th Air Refueling Squadron KB-29s take off, climb to 2500 feet of altitude and level horizon.

Captain Brewer turns to Colonel Sheffield, smiles and asks: “Permission to put her on the deck Sir”.

Colonel Sheffield glances over with a grin, “Granted, put her on the deck”.

“Yes Sir”

“Alexandria Tower this is 68700 requesting permission to make a low pass fly by over the field.”

”68700 you are cleared for fly by”

The Command pilot, Captain James Brewer, drops the nose of the KB-29 down into a 30-degree dive. His face lights up as he pushes forward on his throttles. “Hang on boys we’re going to go say "good-bye" .

KB-29 68700-command ship descends to make the approach across the field at 100 feet.

Back on the ground I see a C-124 transport aircraft setting on the ramp. I make a beeline for it. I climb up into the cockpit, open the hatch to the roof and climb out onto the top of the aircraft. Far off in the distance I can hear the roar of the KB-29’s dropping in altitude in a single file air march. With throttles wide open the flight of KB-29s start their low altitude pass. One after another they wave their wings, bidding farewell to the ground crew and squadron members below as they rumble across the field.

Off in the distance I spot KB-29 44-69674 with Captain Lightner at the controls. He drops lower and

KB-29 aircraft make a low level pass over Alexandria AFB on their way to Sculthorpe, England





Captain Brewer, encased in number 68700, turns his thoughts towards Goose Bay, the next destination in route to England.

lower as he makes his approach to the ramp. He places the nose still lower going for the full rush. The speeding aircraft passes in front of the C-124 only 40 feet above the deck traveling well over 300 miles per hour. Captain Gerald Lightner, smiling from ear to ear, waves from the window as he pulls the aircraft up and makes a sharp turn to the left and headed for Sculthorpe, England.

1500 Hours: Alexandria LA to New York, City. The Ground Crew, and other personnel of the 420 Air Refueling Squadron are now loaded onto two C-124s and off to McGuire AFB, New Jersey. That night it was "Hell-o New York City. The 420th Fly Boys are in town for a little fun."

0700 Hours: A blue Air Force bus picks up the squadron and hauled us to Sheep's Head Bay in New York City. We unloaded in front of a huge ship named the USS DARBY which is a United States Navy troop transport ship. This is the first time this Nebraska farm boy has ever seen a ship this size.

0900 Hours: The squadron personnel are placed on board the USS DARBY for the trip across the Atlantic ocean. We are told we will dock 8 days later at South Hampton, England. Once we are loaded on board the ship we are assigned sleeping quarters. After that it is back up to the deck to wave good-bye to anyone who will wave back.

1100 Hours: The ship moves away from the dock and crossed Sheep's Head Bay on to the Atlantic ocean.

I begin to walk around the deck. As I do I come upon a couple of guys playing guitars. I sit down with them and before you know it we have formed a band. I check with one of the Navy officers in charge of entertainment and find out they could use a band. We get the Job.

2100 Hours: The band begins to play on board for the first class passages. We play until 0100 hours.

0130 Hours: The dance is over and the whole band (consisting of Five People: Army, Navy, Marine and Two Air Force guys) go down to the lower decks of the ship to the galley. We eat steak and play cards with the Navy boys until 0300 hours and then off to bed. This becomes the nightly routine for the next eight days.

We dock at South ampton, England and are transported to Sculthorpe RAF Station by bus.



Members of the 420th ground crew aboard the USS Darby, moving across the Atlantic, headed towards Southampton England, located near the Sculthorpe RAF Station.

16 September 1955 all ten aircraft got off the ground at Langley but only nine arrived on time at Keflavik the next morning. K.P. Iverson had encountered trouble and landed at Goose, Newfoundland. Keflavik was a dismal jumble of black volcanic rock and only plants living on base were on postage stamps. The day before our big mission over Iceland, Captain Byard W. Hyde's crew was running up the engines on the their aircraft



Top: The sign on this train car reads: 'Southampton, welcomes the Long Island RR. Hi-ya Budd.' This type of station was commonplace throughout England and most of Europe.

Above: Aerial view of Sculthorpe RAF Station

when one of them blew up. They worked all night installing a new engine. Early the next morning they were running up the new engine when it also blew up. That left only eight aircraft. It made us ponder the results if something like this should happen on take off. A day or two later we were able to get the aircraft on into Sculthorpe. They had been flown so hard and accumulated so many defects that none of them were safe to fly without extensive repairs. No one at Sculthorpe had done anything to establish a supply of parts. The Major whom was assigned to provide parts had rotated back to the U.S. and the list was found abandoned on his old wooden desk. Our careful planning was out the window. Welcome to England. 🇺🇸



TRENCH ART

WWII Shell Cases

During World War II, creating decorative objects from weapons of war as mementos or souvenirs was a practice probably as old as warfare itself. These keepsakes are called "Trench Art" because of the marvelous works of art created during WWII by prisoners of war on both sides.

The smaller caliber brass shell cases were a popular and plentiful material used to create this form of art during WWII, such as those shown in the photos. They are masterpieces of a craftsmanship, both B-29 Superfortress and P-38 are made of rifle shells and cannon shells of all sizes.

Popular trench art themes included floral designs, animals, patriotic figures, unit identifications, battles and various military images such as aeroplanes, tanks, and artillery pieces. Other shells bear personal inscriptions to loved ones, while some give detailed accounts of a soldier's service. The smaller 37mm shell casings were used to produce many of the same decorative effects. They fit easily into a pocket or kit bag and were much more 'transportable' than the larger shells.

Trench art donated by:
Tom & Rose Marie Austin