

Master Sgt. Stan Krause writes postcards to members of his family in Nebraska. Krause has been in the guard for 14 years.

Staci McKee for the DN

Above and beyond

Flying 'gas station' crew makes the most of traveling

Editor's note: The following story details a deployment of the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Air Refueling Wing. The trip went from Nebraska to New Hampshire to Germany to England and back.

By Matthew Waite
Senior Editor

In a lamp lit corner of room 263 of the Howard Johnson's in Portsmouth, N.H., Master Sgt. Stan Krause sat filling out a couple of postcards.

The rest of the Nebraska Air Guard crew was at the hotel bar — it was karaoke night on this frigid Monday.

Krause was alone, but that didn't bother him. He had been here before.

For the members of the 155th Air Refueling Wing of the Nebraska Air Guard, it was just another day at the office.

The crew flew out of Lincoln near dawn on the first leg of their deployment. They would be going from Lincoln to New Hampshire, then to Germany and finally to England before going home again.

But not every minute of the deployment was spent on the job. For the men and women on the flight — eight crewmen, five medics and six civilian passengers — there was a lot of time off the clock.

There was time to see the sights, time to relax. A member of the armed forces for more than 18 years, with more than 14 years in the Air National Guard, Krause had been around the world.

Stamps in his passport include Turkey, Honduras, Panama, Germany (twice), Iceland and England.

And at every stop, the master sergeant puts pen to paper and writes postcards to his parents in Grand Island and to his three daughters. He is divorced, and his daughters have all grown up.

Krause's youngest daughter, a recent graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, takes care of things when he is gone. He writes out his bills and she mails them. She also takes care of his fish.

Krause, a bald man creeping towards middle age, said he called twice a week to make sure everything was OK at home.

But for Krause, Air Force barracks and motel rooms had become a second home.

"I have been on enough of these that you learn the secrets to making yourself comfortable," he said, sitting in a wood and canvas chair in the corner of his room.

The secrets, he said, are bringing a sleeping bag for the long trans-Atlantic flight, learning what clothing to do without and learning how to wash clothes in the sink.

"You learn to get maximum usage of your

clothing," he said, laughing. "And it works. It is something you learn from other people."

Technical Sgt. Ronald Guenther, Technical Sgt. Lyle Denton and Krause looked out of place.

Walking down the heart of Boston's bustling Quincy Market on Tuesday afternoon, the trio seemed like an island in the middle of a monsoon.

Businessmen and women in their navy suits and expensive trench coats scurried away with their lunches, trying to get back to an office nearby.

As the noon hour pressed on, the crowd in the marketplace, a 100-yard long strip of food stores, got pushier.

Seeking refuge in a postcard shop/newsstand, the three split up. Krause bought more postcards while Denton and Guenther quietly watched the crowd roll by.

"It kind of makes you appreciate what you have back home," Denton said about traveling. "In fact, I haven't seen a place I would rather live (than Nebraska)."

After a thought, Denton said his career in the guard had surprised him.

"I kind of look forward to going on these trips," Denton said. "I didn't ever expect to go to overseas."

It was time to get down to business. At 9:06 p.m., the mission briefing started in a medium-sized auditorium at Pease Air National Guard Base in Portsmouth, N.H.

Capt. Nicole Bixler of the New Hampshire Air National Guard stepped up to the podium. Her short hair and stern face spoke only of the business at hand.

The auditorium had crews from five other KC-135's from guard bases in Kansas, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire.

Using transparencies, Bixler went over the mission. Crews were to "drag" 16 F-16's flying out of Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina across the Atlantic, refueling them ten times.

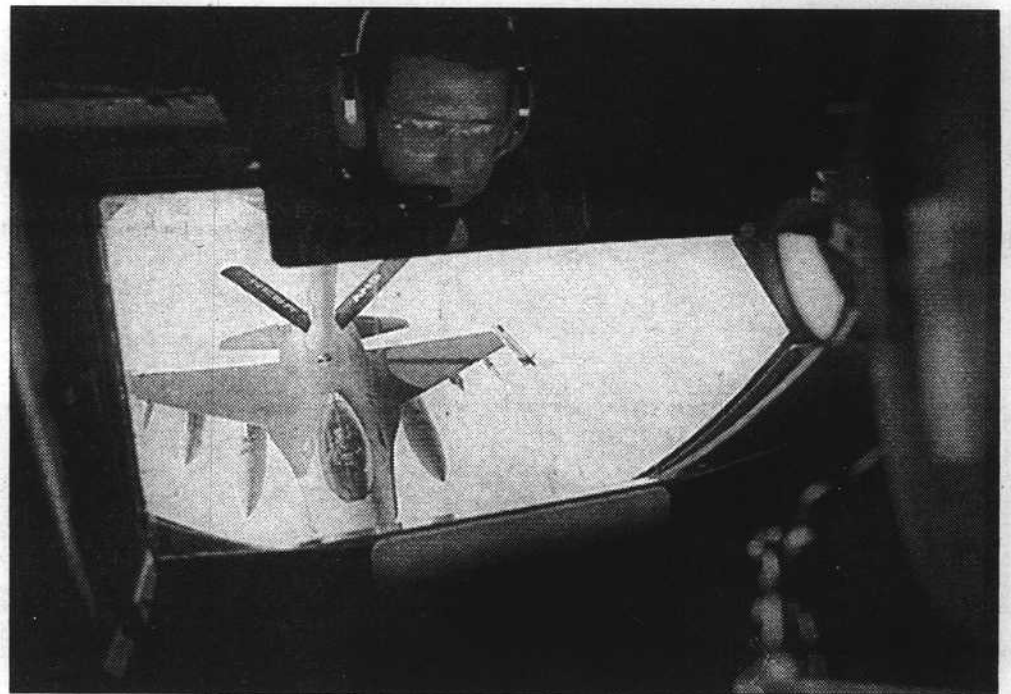
Two of the tankers were to make the whole trip, one landing at Royal Air Force Mildenhall, a base in England, and the Nebraska plane was to land at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

Bixler ran down the flight plan with speed and precision, using a blizzard of acronyms. At times, her monologue sounded like a whole different language.

After a lengthy run-down of abort options, Bixler breathed in and cracked her first smile. "Clear as mud, right," she said.

A low chuckle was heard and the crews broke up for separate crew briefs.

After about 35 minutes of waiting, they started



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Leighton Michaelson lies in the boom pod guiding the long refueling boom into an F-16 somewhere over England.

to load up.

The plane was freezing, since it had sat dormant on the runway, unheated, for almost two days. The passengers quickly got situated and hunkered down for the night.

By the time the plane was prepared to take off, just after 1 a.m. EST, several (including the author) were sleeping.

Over England, the sun had been up for some time — it was 10:30 a.m. In Nebraska, it was 4:30 a.m.

The morning sun was well on its way to the top of the sky over the North Atlantic when Gold 91, the Nebraska tanker, got to show its stuff.

The tanker, referred to by the crew as a "gas station in the sky," had flown all night as other tankers refueled the F-16's.

It was the Husker flight's turn to play Texaco. Like hummingbirds to a feeder, the single seat fighters would ease up under the tanker, which was trailing a long "boom."

The boom, a fifty-foot-long pole driven by a boom operator, gently slid into a hole in the back of the F-16. Aviation gas then flowed rapidly into the aircraft.

The feeding took place 9,000 feet above the ground at speeds around 550 miles per hour.

Crewmen joked that the plane was so much like a gas station in the sky, some of the boom operators wore Texaco and Exxon hats. During some missions, the plane's call signs were gas station names.

As the flight went on, energy sagged and tensions rose.

"We need to take a stress test man, a chill

pill," Leighton Michaelson, a boom operator, said over the radio.

F-16 after F-16 lined up for gas, topped off and ducked away.

With the second refuel, the Husker flight gave six aircraft 59,400 pounds of fuel. That's 8,865.67 gallons of gas.

"It's a blast," Michaelson said of his job as boom operator. "It's the best enlisted job in the Air Force."

Michaelson, a father of two, was the only full time National Guard member in the crew. He said his job had taken him from England to France to Germany to Japan to Pango Pango.

"I had to look where that was on the map," Michaelson said with a laugh.

Being away from the wife and kids is tough, but he said the job of the tanker was needed world wide. And it doesn't hurt that being a boom operator is fun.

After a week of refueling operations for the crew, and a week of work in the base hospital for the medical staff, everyone was ready to go home.

So ready, the pilots bet the Kansas crew \$100 they could beat them to their own base.

After more than 10 hours in the air, Capt. Paul Hutchinson landed his plane — 10 minutes behind the Kansas crew.

"Ah, if I would have meant it, I would have gone faster," Hutchinson said.

After a customs check by two security policemen and a 30 minute flight, Hutchinson lands the plane in Lincoln.

"I'm always happy when I'm home," he said, resetting some of the instruments in the cockpit. "I love the guard, but I love being home."