

MISSION TO MANAS

From Fairchild AFB to Kyrgyzstan with the 92nd ARW



KC135s line up on the flight line at Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan



Preparing for takeoff to Kyrgyzstan



Capt. (Dr.) Jared Kelstrom sleeps atop a cargo pallet



1st Lt. Lincoln Olsen, on his first deployment to Manas



Beds in the back of the plane are a coveted spot to get



A Fairchild Airman at work on a KC135



Soldiers preparing to leave Manas for Afghanistan were a common sight

by Blythe Thimsen
photos by Tim Martin, courtesy of KXLY

Twisting on the nylon-strap-and-metal-framed jump seat that was serving as my bed, I lifted my head out from the warmth of the goose down sleeping bag in which I was cocooned, and looked around as best I could in the pitch-black belly of the KC135R. Everyone was asleep, stretched out on jump seats, in chairs and on top of cargo pallets, trying to catch some shut-eye while they could.

As a member of a team of local media that was invited to travel with a deploying crew from the 92nd Air Refueling Wing at Fairchild AFB to Manas Transit Center, Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia, I had

landed a spot on a KC135R that was roaring its way over the Arctic. For the Airmen on board it was business as usual, but for the media, it was a chance to see firsthand both what it is like to deploy with the Air Force, and the work being done by our local Airmen overseas.

As I surveyed the scene in the dark plane, I turned my attention to the front where my eyes fixed on a blazing red glow I couldn't place. Curiosity got the best of me, so I coaxed myself from the warm sleeping bag into the frigid air, slipping on my wool-lined boots, and made my way to the front of the plane.

Stopping at the door of the flight deck, I looked out through the windshield at one of the most glorious sights I had ever seen. The sun was rising over a carpet of clouds, spilling its beautiful colors onto the world, welcoming another day. As the vibrant reds, oranges and golden hues reflected onto the layer of clouds, they created an indescribable image.

1st Lt. Lincoln Olsen, seeing me from his co-pilot seat, smiled and motioned me forward, inviting me to join him and our pilot, Capt. Christopher Dieter, in the jump seat between them. Squeezing in the tight space, I put on the headset they offered me. "Hi," said

Olsen. "Were you able to get some sleep?"

"A little," I answered, "but I saw this and had to come up. Wow, it is so beautiful."

"We're watching the sunrise over Iceland," he explained, pointing out our location on a map he handed to me.

"Do you think you have the coolest job in the world," I asked. "On days like this I do," he said, smiling as he looked out the window at the stunning view.

Lest you think it is just another day in paradise, rest assured, the work that awaits the deploying Airmen is grueling and



Long days are the norm for this group of maintainers from the 92nd ARW, who are stationed at Manas, but they still manage to have some fun.

demanding. Most of them will work 12 to 14 hour days, six days a week for the entire time they are deployed. Life on the base leaves little time for much more than working, eating and sleeping.

To reach Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan, requires an 18½-hour flight that is split between two days, with an overnight at RAF Mildenhall, in England. Upon boarding the plane, the deploying Airmen settle in for the two-day trip and prepare themselves for the task ahead. The steady hum of the plane's engines serve as a lullaby, coaxing them to sleep as the aircraft climbs high into the sky, bidding Spokane farewell, and heading to the other side of the world.

The KC135R doesn't have the style and niceties of commercial airlines. Walls padded with grey vinyl insulation mean there are few windows out of which to look. Exposed vents and wires run along the ceiling of the plane, and without the carpet, paneled walls and regulated heat of commercial airlines, it gets frigid as we fly over the Arctic inside of these "Eisenhower-era" planes, which are the workhorse and lifeblood of Fairchild.

While it is only five after seven in the evening, local time, almost everyone is sacked out shortly after takeoff, catching some sleep while they can, in an attempt to immediately acclimate to the 13-hour time difference between Spokane and Kyrgyzstan. Despite the lack of soft mattresses and room to stretch out, somehow it isn't difficult for the Airmen to sleep, even with the rough surfaces on which they lie. Earplugs help muffle the constant roar of the engines, creating a cocoon in which to escape, making sleep easier. The Airmen stretch out wherever there is space—on the jump seats or on a cargo pallet. Luxury is not an option, and shut-eye is welcomed in whatever form it arrives.

Just as sleep is found in a variety of spots, so too is storage, as every nook and cranny

of the plane is filled with items these Airmen will need for their mission. Ladders and supply cases are bolted to the floor, held down by metal clamps and nylon straps, which are strong, but not as strong as the spirit of the Airmen. No glum faces are found in the bunch. They all seem determined, excited and ready for the mission ahead of them. Most are deploying for 120 days, which is much more tolerable than the yearlong deployments faced by other military branches. Though their deployments are shorter in length, they will have to deploy more often, leaving their loved ones behind multiple times per year.

LIFE AT MANAS

Sometimes called "Fairchild East" because of the large number of Fairchild Airmen who are deployed there at any one time, Manas Transit Center is a key transit point for U.S. military personnel coming to and going from the war in Afghanistan. There is a heavy and constant traffic of servicemen. Flights land 24 hours a day, meaning that the base operates nonstop. On our first night there, 1,500 servicemen processed through, followed by 3,000 the next night. In the month of May, alone, Manas welcomed 55,000 transiting personnel.

Many of the men who come through find themselves housed in massive tents. The lights are never off in these shelters, and there are rows upon rows of bunk beds on which tired soldiers find much needed rest.

With far fewer women than men on base, there is limited housing for women, which guaranteed me a spot out of the tents and tucked in the Women's Transient dorm where narrow rooms held two bunk beds and a wall mounted air conditioner/heater where a window should have been. Needing it to be quiet and dark 24-hours a day, so that incoming servicemen can sleep, there are no windows in the rooms. Still, I felt lucky. I was in a building with lights that could be turned off, with privacy and



Above: All branches of the military transit through Manas, including this unit of Marines who were on their way downrange to Afghanistan. Below: Early morning at Manas Transit Center



Sgt. Aaron McLaughlin, a boom operator from the 92nd ARW at Fairchild, refuels an F-15 Striker Eagle over Afghanistan

quiet in which to sleep. The men in the tents did not have that luxury, but their accommodations seemed like a five-star hotel for many of them who had been downrange. There was no fear of attack or enemy fire, no worries about walking into an ambush or losing a friend to hidden dangers.

Because of the mountainous surroundings, there is no way Kyrgyzstan can compete in the global market, so they have an isolated economy, which explains why the poverty rate is 23.3%. The average income on the Kyrgyzstan economy is \$440 per year. With such limited opportunities to earn a living, the presence of the transit center at Manas provides a source for employment, as well as a group of patrons for the goods and services of the local economy.

Victor Tyumentsev is a translator who began working at the base nine years ago, when it first opened. "It is very good to live in Kyrgyzstan if you have an American salary," he says. "I invested all the money I earned in my children's education."



Manas Transit Center employee Gulkaiyr Kabylbekova

He and his wife have five children who live in five different countries, and all of which were able to get a university education because of the funding Victor provided from working at the base. I asked him if his children would have been able to have the opportunity for an education if he had not worked at the base. "No," he says. "Absolutely, no."

Also benefiting from

the opportunities available because of the U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan is Gulkaiyr Kabylbekova, who began working at the base in March 2010. Kabylbekova believes the Kyrgyzstan government is gaining from the presence of the U.S. military. "I don't share the view of some politicians," she says. "I see the benefit of it here. You have a Russian base and a U.S. base, and the U.S. does a lot more for our country. Russia cannot do as much, and the government here can't do anything."



Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living editor Blythe Thimsen with Manas Transit Center translator Victor Tyumentsev

According to the website of the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, "The U.S. Department of Defense, through the Manas Transit Center, has made payments this year to the Kyrgyz Government of more than \$100 million. The Transit Center conducts its own humanitarian programs, which total \$1.7 million this year, which is not included in the assistance totals above."

"The base itself should advertise what they do, with all of the activities and humanitarian aid," says Kabylbekova. "The main problem is that people don't know the activities of the base. These are very important issues and should be made public."

FUELING THE FIGHT

One of the main activities, or missions, at Manas is air refueling. Roughly 15 hours after having gotten off the plane, I found myself back on the flight line, ready to board another KC135, for a refueling flight over Afghanistan. Fairchild's 92nd ARW makes up 80 percent



photo by David Crary

A Navy F/A-18F Super Hornet refuels off of a KC135 over the mountains of Afghanistan. While most refueling takes place under the plane with the refueling boom, some KC135s, like this one, are also outfitted with wing refueling, which is called Multi-Point Refueling System (MPRS)

of the refueling planes at Manas, emphasizing the vital role our local Airmen play in the success of the war in Afghanistan.

“Knowing that we’re providing fuel to our fighters who are keeping our guys on the ground safe,” is the most satisfying part of Lt. Col Brad Hamby’s day. Hamby, a pilot, is on his second deployment to Kyrgyzstan since he has been at Fairchild. “Pretty much every day these guys are flying is a great day’s work,” he says of the team with which he flies. “What is most rewarding, as a commander, is helping out your folks and teaching them leadership. To see a new 20 year old just out of training, and to see them out here getting it done, is rewarding.”

Getting it done is what the refueling missions require everyday. A KC135 can carry 200,000 pounds of fuel, and will typically offload about half of that to receiver planes. “Once we’re over Afghanistan, we have tracks we go to, but they can push us where we’re needed,” says Hamby. “It’s a very dynamic environment. There’s no guarantee once we get out there. Sometimes it all changes.”

The war, which seems so far away on the evening news and occasional write-ups in the newspaper, suddenly took a front-row seat as I looked out the window and saw a Navy F/A-18F Super Hornet hovering on our wing, waiting for its turn to feast of the fuel that would keep it in the air. The Fairchild crew refueled six fighter jets on this mission: four Navy F/A-18F Super Hornets and two F-15E Strike Eagles, which had flown out of Bagram

Airfield, Afghanistan, and were providing cover air support to our ground troops fighting in Afghanistan.

We were close enough that I could see the pilots, each tucked into their cockpit and encased in their helmet and oxygen masks. To know that these Airmen were working to protect the lives of our troops on the ground, and that their success and safety depended upon the fuel they received from Fairchild Airmen, suddenly brought the war from across the world, directly into the streets of Spokane.

The men and women we are in line with at the grocery store, the parents of the kids on the soccer team, and the young man sitting next to us at the coffee shop, may all be contributing directly to the success of our military in the war which rages on the other side of the world. These are our neighbors, sacrificing their safety and time with their families, in order to serve our country.

While they miss their families back home, Hamby and the rest of his crew know that when they are deployed, their focus is on the job at hand. “We have to get the most out of everyone in the squadron,” says Hamby. “Our primary goal is to have quality crews that can support the war mission.” One way that is accomplished is by maintaining stability in the squadron with constant rotations supporting the war.

“The family understands the job I’m doing out here,” says Hamby of his wife and two daughters back home, with whom



Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski shows students their pictures on his camera

he keeps in touch by Skype. “When I first started deploying 15 years ago, you got one ten minute morale call a week.” Considering he has deployed over a dozen times during his career, the increased ability to communicate with family has made the process easier for Hamby, as well as for his family at home.

SACRIFICES OF THE HEART

Talking with family helps, but it doesn’t take away the desire to see them and hug them in person. “Logistically, we’re 13 hours apart, so finding time in each other’s schedule is difficult,” says SSgt. J.G. Buzanowski, a Public Affairs specialist from Fairchild who escorted us on the trip, and whose wife, TSgt. Jennifer Buzanowski, also a Public Affairs specialist, is currently deployed to Manas. “The hardest part is finding time to be available to talk. There’s lots of leaving messages and emails.” Of the 18 months they have been married, they have spent six months together. The rest of the time, one of them has been deployed, serving their country.

“It is extremely frustrating that we are professional communicators by trade, but we have trouble finding time to communicate,” says TSgt. Jennifer Buzanowski as she reflects on the difficulties that a 13-hour time difference present. “I take my job very seriously, though. The best thing about being deployed is that I can be a workaholic and not feel bad about it. When I get to my room at night, I want to be so tired I don’t have time to think about how much I miss the kids.”

For Capt. (Dr.) Jared Kelstrom, who is entering his eighth deployment to Manas in four years, “It’s definitely a challenge being deployed, but it is more of a challenge for my wife,” he says. The support he and his wife receive from their neighbors in Spokane helps make the time away from home easier for Kelstrom to bear. “The community support allows me to focus on my job at Manas,” says Kelstrom, who knows his neighbors back home are pitching in, helping to mow the lawn and watch his son. It is not just the immediate neighbors’ support, but the greater support of the Spokane community that makes Kelstrom and his fellow Airmen know they are appreciated and valued. “The parades, and the local military discounts make us feel appreciated,” he says.

For Chief Master Sergeant Lee Becker, a full time member of the Washington Air National Guard 141st Air Refueling Wing, which is based out of Fairchild, his six-month deployment is set to wrap up at the end of November and he is eager to get home to see his wife and two stepdaughters. Despite having

to be away from his loved ones, Becker has appreciated the chance to deploy to Manas. For many who have been deployed around the world in a variety of locations, a deployment to Manas is a sweet deal. After serving in the deserts of Iraq and the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, Manas is somewhat of an oasis with the nearby trees, the two beers a day allowance and the absence of incoming attacks. It may be an oasis, but that doesn’t mean the workload is any lighter.

“This is the busiest place I’ve ever seen,” says Becker. “For such a small footprint, it is unbelievable what they do.” As he says this, a new strategic ramp expansion is taking place in the back of where he is standing. This new parking area for aircraft will help eliminate the need to back-taxi, which can cause problems on a small runway; additionally, it will get the planes out of sight of the Bishkek airport (whose runway is shared by Manas), providing for more security when it comes to the Air Forces’ fleet.

Seventy-five percent of the workforce for this project comes from the local area, providing jobs in what is otherwise an impoverished region. This is a \$31 million project, funded by the military and the U.S. taxpayers. Some wonder why we invest so much money in a location where there is no guarantee the military will stay on a long-term basis.

“Kyrgyzstan is the crown jewel of Central Asia, because of its location” says Col. Dwight Sones, director of Manas Transit Center. “I think it is very important.” Building friendships and partnerships is essential as well, even if the future of the base is uncertain. “If you go in thinking you want to be here next year,



1st Lt. Andy Hardy, co-pilot on the refueling mission, enjoyed his first trip to Solnyshko School in Vasilievka



TSgt. Jennifer Buzanowski, left and 1st Lt. Jennifer Lemque, right, participated in the humanitarian mission, listening to stories with the students at Solnyshko School

you’ll keep tents up and construction going on. I won’t speculate on if it [Manas] will be here next year or next month. We go with the mindset of doing our mission.” An example of the work that continues is the runway. “We have to take care of it for when we need it,” says Sones, “and when we do leave, we want to leave a



photo by David Crary

Lt. Col Erika Plosa and 1st Lt. Mel Hoffler work on getting their oceanic clearance as they fly us from RAF Mildenhall England, to Fairchild AFB. This was a return flight for them, after a long deployment at Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan.

quality infrastructure for them.”

It is not just the infrastructure and development of the base that is important; it is the infrastructure and development of the local communities and the people who live there. That is why humanitarian missions are such a major part of the work done at Manas.

WARM COATS, WARM HEARTS

Two full pallets of donated clothing—over 3,000 pounds—collected by KHQ, made the flight over to Kyrgyzstan with us, to be given to people in need. Traveling with Fairchild Airmen, we piled into a van and took to the open roads of Kyrgyzstan en-route to Solnyshko School in Vasilievka, a village 45 minutes from Manas, to bring winter coats to the children at the school.

The drive there was the scariest part of the entire trip, as the roads have no lines, and cars fly across the partially paved roadways at terrifyingly high speeds, taking up whatever space they want. The right side of the road, the left side of the road, right down the middle or zigzagging across; it is all fair game.

Despite the rundown houses we passed on the way to the school, the children were dressed well. When I mentioned that, one of the Airmen asked, “where do you think they got most of these clothes?” They were clothes the Airmen had brought to the school on previous visits. I realized then, the importance of these clothing drives. Piling clothing into a collection bin has never meant much before, but now it has a face and a meaning behind it. These children will be warm this winter, thanks in part to the people of Spokane who were willing to share their abundance with those who have so little.

“We thank the Air Force for supplies,” says principal Manzura Kushbaeva through a translator. “Every time they come they bring supplies. It was a heavy burden for the families. Thanks to the base, much assistance was provided.”

It is not just clothing and winter coats that are donated. Airmen from the civil engineer squadron have volunteered to come rebuild part of the school, recently putting in new windows, which was an estimated \$10,000 donation.

SSgt. Michael Russell, who is a boom operator, has been stationed at Fairchild for almost five years and is on his eighth Manas deployment, but this is his first visit to this school. With an average of five refueling flights a week, his free time is limited, yet he wanted to spend it in service to the locals. “I was looking forward to interacting with the kids,” he says. “We see adults on the base and they are happy to see us, but kids are always smiling!”

“When you first initially go off base, you are grateful for what you have,” says Russell. “You have culture shock at first, really. Poverty is all that you see.” Despite the economic poverty, Russell is a firsthand witness to the rich spirit in the community. “I’ve never seen a negative attitude,” he says of the local’s reaction to the visits by the Airmen. “Everybody is positive and they seem grateful for the job we are doing. [The children] are too young to appreciate that, but it makes you feel good to know you are helping.”

“I’ve been to the school two times, and it seems like progress is made with

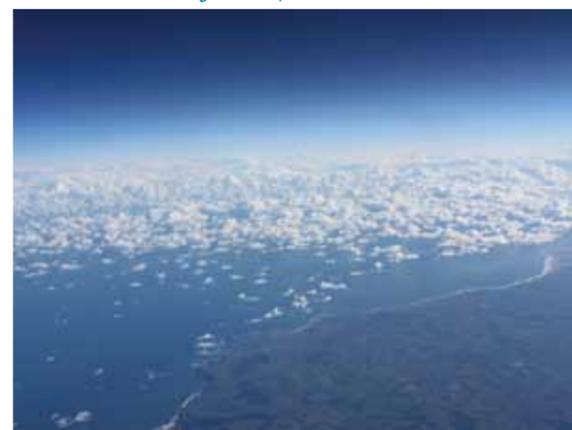
the kids on every visit,” says 1st Lt. Andy Hardy, the co-pilot from our refueling flight. “They used to look at you and stand back. Now they run to see you. My memory will be how great a time I had with the community service. I’m glad our commander put it as something for us to do.”

It’s not just community service, but service on so many levels that drives our local Airmen to do their job. For Kelstrom, who joined the military after September 11th, his service reflects his dedication to his country. “I joined the Air Force because I wanted to see the world, for the adventure, and because I love my country,” he says, echoing a common mindset of those who serve.

As we left Kyrgyzstan and began the long flight back to Fairchild, I wondered how many times that same route I was on had been flown by Fairchild Airmen, and how many more would make the journey. Some will be ecstatically flying home to their loved ones after a deployment, while some will be deploying and leaving their families. What makes them do it? I thought back to something from the day before. As we were eating lunch outside, the roar of an Air Force plane taking off overhead stopped our conversation. “What’s that,” I asked the Airmen I was sitting with, thinking they would tell me the type of plane it was, as they had been doing earlier. The Airman across from me smiled and said, “That’s the sound of freedom.”

Freedom is the thing our local Airmen sacrifice their safety and time with their families for. Freedom is the greatest gift of all and is one we are given daily, thanks to the service and sacrifice of our local Airmen. Freedom is the greatest reason we have to say thank you to them, for all they do. **S**

The beautiful view from the boom pod of the KC135, departing RAF Mildenhall England for Fairchild AFB. Even more beautiful for the returning Airmen was the thought of getting home to Spokane and to their loved ones.



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