

THE RIDE

Monday, May 2, 2011

Forty one years ago I spent three months in Europe. I have wanted to go back ever since. I retired almost four years ago. I needed Jan to retire to make the Europe trip happen.

Since I am retired military I can fly Space-A (space available). This usually happens on military cargo planes that have room to still carry some passengers.... and their luggage. Sound pretty simple. After all, I used to fly Space-A forty some years ago. Things have changed. I am learning as I go along.

On the [Space-A](#) website there are two flights listed, scheduled to leave Charleston AFB for Rota, Spain.

I went on line a week ago and sent a request to fly Space-A. The email went to Charleston, SC; Norfolk, VA; Jacksonville, FL; Dover, Delaware. All the possible places we might want to fly out of. This message was to cause us some problem later. I printed a copy of the message. I had read that base passenger terminals were notorious for not getting, or not keeping a copy. I might need proof that I had signed up.

The thing holding us up is Jan's medication. At 10:30am I went to the elementary school down the street where I volunteer seating the kids during lunch. Jan soon called me at school on my cell phone. She had her meds. We were ready to go. I left school half hour early.

We left home and headed to Charleston. I got on the phone and called the base temporary housing. We had a room for the night. It was five and a half hours to Charleston. I picked a route that didn't require us to drive through the city of Charleston. The Air Force Base is on the north side of Charleston.

Once on the base I headed for the passenger terminal. There was no one there but the passenger representative. He put us on the list for tomorrow's flight. There were two flights scheduled so we had high hopes. Each plane could hold up to 73 passengers. Each plane was a C-5 Galaxy. A huge plane whose main purpose was cargo. Lots of cargo. Things were looking good.

I remembered a seafood restaurant on Shem Creek, on the other side of the Cooper River. We had a nice seafood restaurant. Good food. We ate on the porch, overlooking the creek full of fishing boats, at sunset. Things were looking good. Real good.

Getting back to the base was easy. The room was very nice. It had a comfortable bed.

Tuesday, May 3, 2011

The first thing I did when I got up was check on the flight. I decided to drive over and check myself. I asked the woman at the passenger service desk if there was any change in the Rota flight.

She said it had been canceled. I asked if both Rota flights had been scheduled. "Rota flight", she said. I thought you said Dover flight." Grrrrr.

I went back and got Jan up. We checked out of our room at 11am. When I turned in the room key there was a monitor with a banner that said, "All passenger flights out of Charleston have been cancelled through Friday, May 5th." We drove back to the passenger terminal.

I asked the passenger representative about the notice. She said, "Oh, that." There is something wrong with the banner. They ought to fix that." Grrrrr.

We decided to get a meal before our flight. We intended to report to the passenger an hour early at 3pm

We decided to have breakfast. Off we went on the darn I-26 north. We saw the ad for Denny's and got off. The Denny's is a shiny old time diner. After killing some time we headed back to the base. Mr. Livingston from last night was back on duty. I made sure we were marked present.

There were lots of people there. Since there were 73 seats listed for the flight I wasn't too worried. That would change. They made an announcement that there was a change. There were now only 14 available seats on the huge C-5.

Mr. Livingston posted a list of all the passengers. I was relieved to see that we were on the list. The bottom of the list. My smile was short-lived. I looked at the list closer. We were passengers 23 and 24 for a flight with 14 seats. Now I was confused. I talked to another waiting passenger. He set me straight.

When you sign up for Space-A, your sign-up is for 60 days. The longer you are on the list, the higher priority you have. Of course you run the risk of flying out somewhere and your 60 days running out. Here it was May 3rd. I had signed up on April 23rd. Oh well, there was that second C-5. It was listed with 73 seats. The first plane left.

Roll call was approaching. Mr. Livingston posted another list. Not again. We were on the bottom of the list. That was okay. With 73 seats we were sure to get on this one. What I didn't realize was life was playing with me. Hah, hah.

Roll call came and went. The time for roll call, that is. There was no roll call. The plane didn't show up. So, we didn't go.

Here it was 5pm. I suddenly realized that I needed to call the Air Force Inn and try to get a room. Rooms are always hard to get in Charleston. That's what I read about. I can't believe we actually got a room. \$39 a night we can afford. We didn't have a very restful night.

Wednesday, May 4, 2011

At dinner Tuesday night we had a discussion. We could have a problem getting a flight because of our sign up date. We talked about how long we could hold out in Charleston waiting for a flight. If we didn't catch the C5 the next day there wasn't one scheduled through Friday.

We decided, since we drove 350 miles to get here we would stay in Charleston as long as we could stay on the base. The problem here is that I am retired and we can stay on the base on a space available basis.

Today, day three, Jan wanted to shop. Kohl's has some outfits that she likes. She has shopped at the stores in Tallahassee and Valdosta, but they were out of her sizes. We hit the two stores in the area and she got some great buys. After that, back to the base.

2 pm, We were early again. The passenger rep posted the names present. We were at the bottom of the list again, 18th and 19th.

They made an announcement. C5 to Rota, On schedule, 73 seat "firm". Firm is the magic word. Yeah..... Almost, five minutes later they changed that to "20 seats." Oh crap. We were 18th and 19th with 45 minutes to go. You guessed it, two more showed up. They went right to near the top of the list. Now we were 20th and 21st.

My heart sank. How could this happen again. I will say this. The passenger representative, Mr. Livingston had been very helpful up to this point. A harassed man, but very polite.

I keep telling those kids at the school, "Be nice." Be nice to everyone, no matter what.

Anyway, Mr. Livingston walked across the room to the check in counter. You know, where you check in your checked bags and get your boarding passes. He talked to the uniformed Air Force men there and asked them to see if the pilot would please allow one more. Fat chance of that.

Roll call came. It hurt to hear Mr. Livingston call off those 19 names to go to the check in counter. Jan and I just sat there. Sure I could go on that last seat.

Then, just before the others boarded the bus, Mr. Livingston came over and said they were going to allow that 21st passenger. Us. Whew..... in spades. I couldn't believe our good luck.

As the bus took us out to the plane my wife remarked, "No windows!!" Did I mention that it was a cargo plane? It was loaded with cargo, headed for Afghanistan presumably. Taking retired military personnel is a distant secondary job.

In addition to an enormous cargo hold, the plane, a C5 Galaxy, has 73 passenger seats on an upper deck between the wings, extending to the rear. Six seats across, divided by an aisle.

We went up the boarding stairs to the cargo deck. Then we had to climb a 20 foot ladder to the upper deck. Passengers have to climb a steep stairway to the passenger deck. We had to carry our carry-on luggage up the stairs.

The flight was arranged so as each passenger could have a set of 3 seats to lie down and sleep. Everyone got three seats to lie on during the flight, but us. Even so Jan and I had an empty seat between us. You talk about leg room. Sitting up in my seat I couldn't touch the seat in front of me; still six inches past my fingertips. You can't complain about leg room on a C5.

Jan was a bit worried. No windows in that upper deck; just a couple of small portholes for the crew back there to check the progress of the ground crew.

We got off the ground at 7pm. About two hours to Bangor, Maine to refuel. We had to get off the plane for that. We were back in the air at midnight. I couldn't sleep. Jan tried, but no go.

I did plan for this trip. We both had our iPods. I had some movies on my iPod. The joke was on me. That C5 was so loud that you couldn't hold a conversation with the person next to you. You can't even shout to them from 4 inches, "Too loud". They issued us with ear plugs. Good thing.

They did give us a chance to buy a box lunch for \$4.25. Everyone got one. After we were in the air an hour they passed out the box lunches. A ham and turkey sub, bag of chips, candy bar, a nutrition bar, a cold soda, and a bottle of water. Not too bad.

I had read that these C-5s can be cold. I had worn my sweater on the plane. I had a windbreaker in my carry-on backpack. The temperature in the plane was fine. I took off my sweater and stowed it in my backpack.

A long; long flight.

Thursday, May 5, 2011

Day 1 in Spain, I noticed the sun peeking under the curtains that were over small portholes near the rear of the plane. It was 3am by my watch. That is local time back in Florida.

By the time we landed we were tired beyond belief. There was no way to get off the base to the police station to get our passports stamped by 2pm. It was already 1pm. The police station closes at 2pm.

I had to check the passenger desk to be sure I was on "their" list for the return trip. School could be out for some of the kids before we want to return. The people we talked to said most of the people with children who want to go Space-A will be crowding the US terminals. Coming back from Spain shouldn't be too bad. Uh huh. I sure do want to believe that.

No ground shuttle on the base.

Car rental was about twice I expected. Then I learned that the quote was for everything.... like insurance. Got the car. After I drove in Spain I realized that having complete insurance coverage was a *must*.

Back in the car I couldn't get the darned thing in reverse; A Chevy Avero. I finally realized you have to pull up on a ring below the gear shift knob to get it in reverse.

Since we can't go anywhere till we see the police tomorrow morning we got a reservation at the Navy Lodge on base. I was surprised to get one. It is hard to get a room on the base. Prices are twice that at Charleston AFB. It's a nice place though; a good thing too. The desk clerk had all kinds of maps for where we want to go when we leave here. It was our good fortune to have good advice and good maps.

Like Ms Scarlet said in *Gone With the Wind*, "Tomorrow is another day."