

ARIA World Tour 1986

It's hard to believe that it's been 20 years since I last flew around the world. No, I'm not Superman, but I was the lead navigator for an ARIA support mission (Delta Rocket).

The idea began in the summer of 1986. The 4950th Test Wing scheduler at Wright-Patterson AFB approached me about my final sortie. Usually, they try to do something special when an airman takes his "fini" flight. Unfortunately for me, I had been passed over for Major and was required to separate by September 30, 1986. That scenario does not generally lend itself to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but there was a mission to Diego Garcia to support a rocket launch and he asked if I could go.

At the time, the front-end crews in the Test Wing were part-time flyers and full-time staff members with regular staff positions and flew sorties as work requirements permitted. As the Chief of Aircrew Training, I was blessed with a fantastic staff of enlisted men and women who were data entry and tracking experts who required minimal guidance or direction. In other words, I was expendable. Now, this type of mission (long flight time to get on station to a less than glamorous island) wasn't high priority among the cockpit crews, so the trip was offered out for "bid." As we suspected, there were no takers. I had my mission.

Back in the mid-80's, *the* best flying in 135 type aircraft was in the 4950th – a well-kept secret from the other tanker toads (I was a former nav at Beale AFB, CA in Q-models, and A-models at KI Sawyer AFB, MI). Our missions were in the 2- to 8-day range and involved some of the best island spots the Air Force had to offer. One of my all-time favorites was a week in Barbados with *Big Crow*, flying every other day (two crews, one plane) and partying everyday. That trip report may or may not be releasable due to the statute of limitations.

Back to the ARIA mission. As I started to layout the basic mission I realized how tedious the mission would be: at least four days to get to Diego, a few days on site for the launch, and at least five days fighting head winds on our return. As I stared at my charts an idea took shape: why return the way we came? Why not continue going eastward (with the wind) and circumnavigate the world? I ran some rough numbers, prepared my argument, and went to the staff for their thoughts. Flying two aircraft with full crews, we would save one day of travel (per diem) and about eight hours of flying time per plane (numbers are a rough recollection). Plus it might generate some interest with the news media. The staff agreed and the "ARIA World Tour" was born. Once word of "*The Tour*" got out, volunteers crawled out from behind pop machines and abandoned stairwells. I actually had to fight to stay on the mission. My farewell sortie began on September 1, 1986.

ARIA World Tour '86 Journal

DAY 1: September 1, 1986 – Wright-Patterson AFB, OH to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, then to Ascension Island

No mission can succeed without food and Capt. Karen Cola-Francesco supplies a beautiful and tasty "World Tour" cake (Photo 1). The DO and friends wish us well and see us off on this mostly clear Sunday morning (Photo 2). At 0920L AGAR 24 (tail # 61-0329) lifts off from Dayton,

Ohio, to begin our 10-day, 22,922-mile journey. Joining us on this historic and epic adventure is AGAR 91, a C-18 (tail # 81-0891).

AGAR 24 finds a line of thunderstorms 1+24 into the mission, but expert navigation skills save the aircraft and prevent the pilots from panicking and turning into quivering pools of airborne jelly (that's a pilot joke). We settle into our in-flight routines: sleepers, readers, daydreamers, and eaters. Four hours and one minute later AGAR 24 lands at Rosie Roads (Photo 3); AGAR 91 (one of the newer and larger C-18s has more space for equipment, crew, and fuel) continues to Ascension Island.

A quick gas, grease, and go at Rosie Roads is supplied by the US Navy (gas), McDonalds (grease), and Pratt & Whitney TF-33's (go). We are off the island at 1528L and heading to Ascension. The radar shows weather building into a tropical storm north and east of our course and we expect problems with thunderstorms and possible headwinds.

Flying east in the late afternoon we look back and watch as the sun plummets into the ocean. As darkness envelopes the ship, little crew dogs scurry into nooks and corners to sleep and dream of the exciting adventures ahead. As I plot our progress, seven miles above the black sea under the twinkling blanket of stars, I ponder the thought that this multi-million dollar piece of engineering wonderment was built with tens of thousands of parts produced by the lowest bidder.

We land at 0341L on Wideawake Airfield, Ascension Island. Though the crew from AGAR 91 tries in vain to keep the club open for us, they do wait three hours with plenty of ice-cold beer. Both crews relax on the patio and watch the sunrise from the misty ocean.

DAY 2: September 2, 1986 - Ascension Island

We crew rest on Ascension – famous for its blackfish, sharks, volcanic rocks (little or no surfing), turtles, and the dreaded “Under Toad.” Groups head out to all points on this 35-square mile island: some take the bus tour of the “Rock”; several hike to the top of Green Mountain (2,850ft); and many head to Turtle Beach (Photo 4 and 5).

As we prepare for the next leg of the tour we get a call that Tanzania is flexing its international muscle and won't let us fly through their airspace, crushing our plans to fly to Mombassa, Kenya. After numerous phone calls to ARIA control, the State Department, and the pilot's mother, a decision is made to fly south along the African coast to Cape Town for a quick turn around to Diego Garcia.

DAY 3: September 3, 1986 - Ascension Island to Cape Town, South Africa

After leaving the Eastern time zone, changing several time zones and a couple of night flights, it doesn't take our minds and bodies long to enter the “no-time zone” time zone. We sleep when told, we fly when scheduled, and we dine at the fabulous Volcano Club and Snack Bar where we arm ourselves with coffee and cokes for our next leg.

After a quick adjustment to include some extra flight information region (FIR) boundaries, AGAR 24 blasts out of Ascension at 2302L and AGAR 91 six minutes later. We enjoy another moonless night flying over the black vastness of the South Atlantic. Unfortunately, the clearance for our re-planned mission along the South African coast never went through so we must fly VFR for five hours to Cape Town with AGAR 91 46 miles in trail.

Cape Town at night is breathtaking – speckled with yellow, green, and white lights by the millions. We touch down as the sun lightens the eastern horizon.

DAY 4: September 4, 1986 – Cape Town, South Africa to Diego Garcia

Let the games begin. We can't leave the terminal (security and safety) so we “relax” for four hours on plastic airport chairs, an hour of which I spend chatting with eight ATC controllers that were also hanging out.

AGAR 91 has a bad bleed valve and must stay at Cape Town. As AGAR 24 waves goodbye, maintenance folks from both aircraft begin to solve the problems. The 4950th may just have the best young maintenance crews in the Air Force. They know their stuff, they know how to fix airplanes, and they realize the importance of getting the heck out of the Cape Town terminal. Cape Town is even more spectacular during the day, and the radar controllers clear us for visual departure – perfect for photo ops (Photo 6).

After repairs, AGAR 91 takes off at 1400L, cutting their mission crew rest very close. After a LONG day, AGAR 24 lands at Diego Garcia (somehow unexpected) at 2230L in pouring rain, with poor visibility, and strong crosswinds. Maj. Dan Pierre earns a nomination for best landing of the trip. While parking/unloading, the TWA was snapped into the left wheel well. Immediately thereafter, we achieved our second casualty: A1C Charles Simmons (crew chief) clips his scalp on the cargo door while scrambling up the stairs with an oilcan. Flight engineer Bob Meyer administers first aid while waiting for the ambulance. Five stitches and Simmons is back on-board working hard.

British customs at Diego Garcia is in an open, damp garage where we meet Maj. Wells and pick up room keys. After many stops at the wrong dorm buildings, we find the right ones and we wander in the rain to a late night greasy spoon for a needed snack before collapsing exhausted into our rooms.

DAY 5: September 5, 1986 – Diego Garcia: Delta Rocket Operation 5269

We have an early wake-up to file the flight plans and set the weather/mission briefs. The crew bus driver PMEE R. J. Upright picks us up at 1300L (Photo 7). Weather and mission briefs go well, although mission commander Von Canon wants to push the take-off to 1645L (instead of 1530). They finish refueling around 0530L and return to pre-flight around noon. The work done by the maintenance personnel was superb and got even better after takeoff.

AGAR 24 “Makes it Happen.” With no rhyme or reason, stuff starts to break. The TACSAT drops off when a generator blows and gets replaced with a generator from another station. The high frequency (HF) radio goes out so we set up a relay, via the front HF, between the mission commander and AGAR 91, and from the mission commander and ARIA control. To make the relay work, the flight engineer makes a long interphone cord that requires me to push the transmit button when the mission commander wants to transmit. The number 3 engine begins to fluctuate. Doppler drops into memory in orbit so I use the pilot ground speed for timing. The oxygen system is low from a leak and the crew switches to the yellow bottles. The antenna is intermittent and the clock will not maintain synch. But the strangest thing of all is the arrival of ARIA 3.

A mysterious aircraft has begun shadowing us in the orbit. I mean, it is the *middle* of the night and we are in the *middle* of absolutely NO WHERE. The mystery plane starts high, perhaps 30-35,000ft at 10 to 15nm. It seems to descend below us, maybe to 25,000ft and pulls slightly away. At one point we are close enough to see green and red position lights. It feels very much Twilight Zonish.

After so little sleep, crossing so many time zones, and with so much flying it’s amazing how well all the glitches are overcome to achieve 100% completion. After the “cluster” to accomplish this mission, the ride back to Diego is anti-eventful. The beer call at The Maj. Wells Lounge in BOQ 8 is a spectacular success. The night (Photo 10) was long and rousing as many of us watch from Walls Beach as the sun pops out of the Indian Ocean.

DAY 6: September 6, 1986 – Diego Garcia to Guam (through or over Clark AB, Philippines)

Though the day dawned bright and breathtaking (Photo 11) we were sound asleep. The officer quarters are very nice one-bedroom kitchenettes; not at all what the gray beards said they

remembered from the old days at Diego. Saturday is the beginning of the end for the mission: continuing east for home, and the extended range of the C-18 comes into play leaving Diego.

The evening launches (are we allowed to fly during the day?) are 2130L and 2145L. AGAR 24 will take 8 hours to reach Clark AB (Photo 12) to refuel (and shop) while AGAR 91 will head straight for Guam, and after 11 hours will land at Anderson AB. To do that, Maj. Vince Guida makes the heaviest take-off in the history of the C-18 aircraft. The over flight of the Philippines (by AGAR 91) is crystal clear and the view of Bataan and Corregidor is much better than in 1942.

Several thunderstorms demand interesting turns and climbs to stay safe and smooth. As AGAR 24 attempts to land at Clark, the PAR controller waves us off. That green mountain is lush and very close. Capt Cola-Francesca makes a finest-kind landing over the barrier. As the engines spool down we grab our wallets and the fun begins. Divide and conquer. While the crew chiefs and maintenance members wrestle with the airframe and the pilots file flight plans, the rest head to Angeles City like a swarm of green shopping monsters with unlimited charge cards. Karen and Rita (Lt Wilson) give new meaning to the term “born to shop.” A quick snack and we load the booty onto the aircraft. The three and a half flight to Guam (Photo 13) is a picnic after so many eight or so hour missions.

AGAR 91 crew meets us at Base Ops with the last rental car and beer. We are still operating on the no-time zone, so it’s time to unwind and party (or shop). A handful of the hardcore go downtown to the Hilton for dinner, but most just drink dinner. The party on the veranda begins to fade away around 0600L.

DAY 7: September 7, 1987 – Guam R&R

We have an entire day off and boy do we need it. The afternoon beach party is wonderful. Terague Beach (Photo 15) is jam packed with activities: snorkeling, swimming, beer, food, and volleyball (Photo 14): Operations vs. Maintenance. I don’t recall who won so it must have been maintenance. Some of us head out for dinner at the Jolly Roger with beers at the Rosen Crown and the Blue Water. I honestly can’t remember but it’s in my notebook (anyone that recalls and can fill in any and all gaps feel free to add inputs).

DAY 8 & 9: September 8-9, 1986 –Guam to Hickam AFB, HI

On Monday I run four miles with Karen (that’s what my notes say). After a dreadfully early bus (0400L), and in spite of frightful humidity and extremely short tempers, the crew of AGAR 24 overflies Wake Island (Photo 16) and lands quietly in Hawaii. Good news, we are going to stay downtown at contract quarters, so no out-of-pocket money, and just three blocks from the beach (Photo 17). We join up with AGAR 91 and spread out over the three B’s (beaches, bars, and bargains).

Tuesday morning I run 4.5 miles with “Ski.” He must be from AGAR 91 because he isn’t on the orders for AGAR 24. After dinner at a Chinese restaurant with Capt Scott Marshall we depart on another night flight.

DAY 10: September 10, 1986 – Hickam AFB, HI to Wright-Patterson AFB, OH

On the flight I grab a shot of AGAR 91 off the wing (Photo 18). The mood is festive as we anticipate the landing amidst local news crews covering the around the world mission. We have a special offload planned. There are two customs that aircrews must adhere to. First, it is an honor to be the first person to disembark the aircraft from a returning TDY. Second, the first person to use the “honey bucket” must carry the evidence off the aircraft. Back in the day of male-only crews, we only used the stand-up liquid relief tube and held off on “number two” except in a personal emergency. If it became necessary to sit, the “seal was broken” and all flight crew would use it. However, it was the first user who had the honors to remove the offensive cargo.

Approaching Wright-Patterson, much to everyone's disappointment, the word trickles down from Washington DC: NO press coverage. Seems there's a bit of concern about drawing attention to the mission and the sensitive nature of our operations. So much for our 15 minutes. Undaunted, the first man off the plane (I don't recall but I thought it was a crew chief) carries the clear, heavy bag. Now that's a sight for the staff photographers. I did receive a nice welcome home hosing down (an old military tradition) and thus ended my Air Force flying career with just over 3,000 hours. A mere seventeen days later, we party again at the "Snake Pit" for my AF Farewell Blowout Bash. That party really is another great story; however, I need to check the statute of limitations before putting that tale to print.

A few leftovers:

- Best flight lunch – Hickam
- Best room – Diego Garcia (on-base), Hickam (off-base)
- Best landing – Diego Garcia (nasty crosswinds and rain)
- Best bus driver – Ray J. Upright
- Best party – Guam beach party
- Best air show – Wright-Patterson, September 10, 1986 at 1238L
- Flight time for AGAR 24: 62.3 hours with 9 T/O and landings
- Flight time for AGAR 91: 59.7 hours with 7 T/O and landings
- Best flight lunch – chicken (320 lunches or 80 chickens)
- Best photo – Photo 9 (it's my desk top)

If any of you were on this tour or can provide further insight or names, please contact flyaria. Thanks to all the flyers and support folks who made this final mission so special and to those who still "Make it Happen".

Keith Quinn

Former Capt, former C-135 navigator/instructor, former world traveler