

High Flyer

HARPER SERVED ON
ADVANCE TEAM FOR
AIR FORCE ONE

By Sherrie Flick

WHEN PRESIDENT BILL Clinton flew to Helsinki, Finland, to meet with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in March 1997, it was Jeff Harper '81 who told the Air Force One pilot where to park the 747.

For three years during the Clinton administration, Harper served as an advance agent preparing Air Force One and Two for takeoff and landing. That Helsinki flight marked Harper's last and favorite trip as an agent. "It was March and it was cold, but it was a neat city, neat people."

Growing up in Endwell, N.Y., Harper never imagined he'd one day work so directly for a U.S. president. He did know, however, by seventh grade that he wanted to fly airplanes.

Harper was a scholarship cadet in Wilkes University's Detachment 752. After receiving his mathematics degree, he headed to navigator school at Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, Calif., as a second lieutenant. Less-than-perfect eyesight kept him from becoming an Air Force pilot, but he later earned a private pilot's license.



Harper now works for a consulting firm planning for the next Air Force One.
PHOTO BY STEVE BARRETT



Harper, shown in top photo with President Clinton, supported Air Force One flights for three years during the Clinton administration.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF JEFF HARPER

After stints at Grissom Air Force Base, Indiana, and March Air Force Base, California, where he flew in KC-135 air-to-air refueling aircraft, he was hand-picked to be an advance agent. He gained a special security clearance, passed the interview process, and was seated in 1994 at the rank of major.

“It’s probably the only job in the Air Force where you support the president of the United States. It was an honor,” he says.

Harper served Air Force One in addition to his regular duty, which involved coordinating KC-135 operations on the battle staff of a three-star general. Schedulers would call upon a pool of 60 advance agents, two of whom were needed for each Air Force One stop.

Trips might take one day or two weeks. He flew into London, Indonesia, the Philippines, Iceland, Las Vegas, Boston and Los Angeles, among other destinations.

He didn’t fly in Air Force One; instead, he traveled ahead of the plane to coordinate plans and security with the airport and pilots. Agents serve as the eyes and ears at the airports for the

president, the flight crew, the Secret Service and anyone involved in any Air Force One flight. They coordinate with air traffic control and fire and rescue teams, and ensure security of aircraft fuel.

“Before any fuel is put on board that particular airplane, it is tested and secured,” Harper notes. “We tell the pilot where to park, what time he needs to be there. We do drawings of the air field, scale drawings of the runway, where to taxi, measurements in feet from various obstacles and other airplanes.”

Pilots receive detailed, step-by-step directions and know exactly how to taxi and park, as if they’ve already been to a particular airfield before. “We’d have lines taped on a ramp — a ‘T’ — that’s where the plane was to stop at exactly the right time,” says Harper. “It had to be exact.”

It’s a zero-error work environment. “At the end of the day, if we saw the president take off or land as planned, that was fun,” says Harper. Sometimes the distinguished visitors (DVs) or the president would acknowledge the advance agents as they stepped off the plane.

Harper eventually moved on to the Pentagon, where he scheduled planes for the vice president, four-star generals, the secretary of defense, secretary of state, and the joint chiefs of staff. He retired from that position in 2004 as a lieutenant colonel.

Today, Harper works for the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton and is analyzing engineering and capability needs for the future fleet of presidential airplanes, scheduled to be in the air around 2017. He lives in Triangle, Va., with his wife, Heidi, and children Shannon, 13, Robby, 10, and Kaylee, 7.

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Lt. Col. Jeff Harper, Triangle, Va.
B.S., Mathematics 1981
M.A.S. Aeronautical Science,
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University 1990

Career: Retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who now works for consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton

Notable: Served on advance crew for Air Force One