

# Pilots on the Front Line: Deployed to the Balkans

By Capt. Jason Kaminicki (PSA) and Flight Engineer Harold (Hal) Carefoot (ASTAR)



LEFT: ALPA members, Capt. Jason Kaminicki (PSA), left, and Flight Engineer Harold (Hal) Carefoot (ASTAR) stand in front of a Czech MI-17 helicopter in Kosovo.  
ABOVE: A winter flight in Bosnia.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

**A**mong the ALPA members in the National Guard and Reserve serving the United States are two Ohio Army National Guard soldiers deployed to the Balkans. Capt. Jason Kaminicki (PSA) is a chief warrant officer 2 and a UH-60 Blackhawk pilot-in-command and unit trainer. Flight Engineer Harold (Hal) Carefoot (ASTAR) is a chief warrant officer 4 and a UH-60 Blackhawk pilot in command and “Team CG” chief pilot. Both are members of Company A 1, 137th Assault Helicopter Battalion, based at Rickenbacker International Airport, Columbus, Ohio.

Capt. Kaminicki and F/E Carefoot were deployed in August 2004 to Kosovo to conduct peacekeeping operations for Kosovo Force (KFOR) 6A. Before NATO intervention, Yugoslavian military forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army were engaged in a confrontation, with “ethnic cleansing” and genocide occurring daily in Kosovo. The KFOR mission was created to stop the genocide and provide a safe and secure environment by a show of force. Military units from 19 states and one territory were assembled to maintain a safe and secure environment in Kosovo for the KFOR 6A rotation. Before the two ALPA members arrived in Kosovo, ethnic tension had erupted into a few days of civil unrest leading to several deaths. Kosovo has remained peaceful since then. But if international forces were to leave the region, a resumption of aggressions or the infiltration of terrorists into the region could place the entire region into turmoil.

Before Capt. Kaminicki and F/E Carefoot arrived in Kosovo, they received months of training in such places as Camp Atterbury, Ind., and Hohenfels, Germany. They finally were “boots on the ground” in August 2004, at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo. Upon arriving in Kosovo, they were required to become familiar with the practices and procedures. This is a very dangerous time in the rotation—

their unit was unloading and setting up operations, and the unit they were replacing was preparing for its return to the United States.

After the 3 weeks of this transition period, commonly called the “left seat/right seat” rides, they found themselves the aviation asset for MNB(E) (Multi-National Brigade East). During their time in Kosovo, they performed operations for their own brigade and joint operations with soldiers from Greece, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Italy, Norway, France, and Germany, to name a few.

The company commander assigned some specific duties to the flight crews. Capt. Kaminicki would stay as a line pilot and trained extensively on quick reaction force (QRF) duties. F/E Carefoot was assigned as the commanding general’s pilot. Although their duties would give them both a different perspective on the operation, they still had the same common goal: to maintain peace and stability in the region.

## Service as a line pilot

A day in the life of a line pilot in Kosovo may require assignment on several different missions. The first is QRF, which is a 12-hour shift. QRF members are to be prepared, with very little notice, to insert, extract, or provide air cover to ground forces. QRF duty usually involves 2 weeks of day duty and then 2 weeks of night duty. QRF duties requires QRF members to operate the helicopter at different readiness condition levels and to ensure that all required equipment is operational. QRF crews are permitted to fly 2 hours of training, but are always subject to recall.

Most missions involve inserting or extracting soldiers from the borders and an occasional cordon and search, which means trying to drop soldiers off quickly to capture a person or persons of interest or to locate weapon caches.

Capt. Kaminicki was able to participate in the first two big missions for his Task Force. First was a multinational mission involving an air assault by an Italian parachute infantry regiment. Aircraft from Switzerland, Italy, and Norway, plus Capt. Kaminicki's U.S. aircraft, inserted the Italian soldiers into three different landing zones. Successfully completing this mission required resolving some barriers in language and in different flight operations procedures. The second mission involved a cordon and search of an entire



**F/E Carefoot, left, shows his Blackhawk helicopter to children from the orphanage his unit adopted in Bosnia.**

town for illegal weapon caches. The mission of Capt. Kaminicki's team was to carry a QRF team that could be inserted at any time to reinforce the ground forces conducting the cordon and search. The mission required more than 6 hours of continuous flying, made possible through use of "hot gas"—refueling without shutting down the engine.

The last mission the fliers could be assigned to was transporting VIPs. Air transportation of VIPs was necessary because of the dangerous and poorly maintained roads. Only poor weather conditions would keep the members of Congress, senators, generals, and colonels from flying. In fact, the unit's nickname, BATS (Bondsteel Air Taxi Service), came from this mission. A 15-minute flight may save a VIP a 2-hour drive.

Flightcrew training doesn't stop just because a person is deployed. If the flight isn't an operational mission, the person is training. Training includes sling-loading HUMVEEs, practicing air movements with soldiers of different nationalities, and working on night vision goggle qualifications.

### **Service as a general's pilot**

F/E Carefoot says, "A wise person once told me when I joined the military to never volunteer, and being called into the commander's office is never a good thing. So, when I was called into the colonel's office and then asked if I would volunteer for a mission, the wise person's advice went right out the window. By the time that I left the commander's office, I had 'volunteered' to be the commanding general's pilot for the deployment in Kosovo.

"Providing 24/7 helicopter support to a general of ficer," he says, "would be a first for me and my unit."

By August 15, F/E Carefoot was in Kosovo, and on September 1, he was in charge of the commanding general's aircraft. He had to select three additional pilots and a crew chief to complete "Team CG." His unit was staffed with experienced aviators, so the selection process was difficult, but finding the right personalities was important. Team members should have thick skin and a lot of patience. A saving grace was the general's aide and his personal security detail having experience working with previous VIP detachments. F/E Carefoot eased his family's concerns for his safety by saying that he always travels with the general's security detail. Security for VIPs is a very serious and dangerous business in today's military, and F/E Carefoot has the utmost respect for those brave men and women of the personal security detail. When he thought his work day was difficult or long, he was just thankful that he wasn't the general's aide, who is much like a personal assistant. She did all the scheduling and preparing the general for his meetings plus all the research into the "local" issues. The lieutenant's dedication and relentless work ethic kept the general on schedule and made F/E Carefoot's assignment that much easier to navigate.

Generals' pilots are really not much different from corporate pilots. The general travels by air to save time; but in Kosovo, the main reason is safety. The road network in Kosovo is poor at best, and the driving style is similar to that of bumper cars.

All of the unit's training was called upon on one of the first missions that F/E Carefoot flew with the commanding general. This was just a simple cross-border flight to the former Yugoslavian republic of Macedonia. Cross-border flights in this region require exact timing. As the crew pulled off these border crossings without difficulty, F/E Carefoot began to see the light at the end of the mission tunnel. But the light he actually saw was the illumination of the master caution panel with a chip main module segment light. He says, "Thank goodness, we had just cleared the mountains—now we had to find a location suitable for a forced landing." The copilot briefed the two generals and the other personnel aboard the aircraft.

After a successful emergency landing, the rest of the aviation task force was put into action. The flight operations personnel who were constantly monitoring all the aviation operations knew exactly what the crew's routes and times enroute between waypoints were and were able to direct help their way. The QRF was launched to provide security and pick up the passengers for the remaining trip to Camp Bondsteel. A downed-aircraft recovery team was dispatched to recover the aircraft. When the day was finally over and F/E Carefoot was enjoying a nonalcoholic beer (alcohol is prohibited for American soldiers in Kosovo), he was extremely proud of how fast and exact the response to their inflight emergency was. All the hard work required before they had arrived in Kosovo had proven to prepare their unit well for the deployment.

### **Soldiers as ambassadors**

U.S. soldiers around the world are performing more than military operations. U.S. soldiers are "ambassadors" for the United States. The unit of Capt. Kaminicki and F/E



**Capt. Kaminicki flies in formation with other helicopters over Bosnia.**

Carefoot adopted a local orphanage. Soldiers visited the children of the orphanage every week. Their families and co-workers also supported the orphanage, sending not only care packages to their soldier, but also boxes full of clothes, games, and infant supplies for the orphanage. The supplies provided much-needed items to these children. Soldiers were always left with a feeling of great satisfaction after visiting the orphanage.

### **Onward and upward**

The deployment of the two ALPA members was set to end on Feb. 15, 2005. But for a small group of the aviation personnel, word came just days before Christmas 2004 that some of them would not be going home in February. This small group, 30 personnel to be exact, would be spending another 6 months in another Balkan country. They soon began to call themselves the “Dirty Thirty.” Most of the “Thirty” waited until after Christmas to tell their families that they would not be coming home in February.

At the end of February, Capt. Kaminicki and F/ECarefoot found themselves in Bosnia. In 1992, Serbians, Croats, and Muslims had been engaged in an “ethnic cleansing” war. In 1993, the United States helped arrange an end to this conflict with a truce signed in 1995 in Dayton, Ohio. The truce became known as the Dayton Peace Accord. Today, the United States is still involved in Bosnia, monitoring the military forces of the former warring factions, and providing stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The deployment to the Balkans provided the unit’s members quite an education about the military, the world, and their employers. All of them have spent time juggling their family life and their civilian and military careers. They have journeyed half way around the world and come to face their own strengths and weaknesses. Capt. Kaminicki says, “I have learned a lot about myself and my fellow soldiers. It has certainly been a challenge.”

The Balkans themselves is a place of breathtaking landscape and trash scattered all along the countryside, enor-

mous mountains and the rubble of bombed-out homes, lush green forests viewed from treetop level and fighting positions and bomb craters. The children’s faces with their smiles and laughter are contrasted with the poverty these children live with every day. As Capt. Kaminicki says, “Most of all, this deployment has given us a new appreciation for the wonderful living conditions we have in the United States.”

### **Dealing with the life back home**

Employers play a monumental part in the life of a deployed reserve component soldier. Some of those deployed had very supportive employers. Some did not. A nonsupportive employer only adds to the stress already imposed on the deployed soldier and his family. The two ALPA

members encourage those who have not served to support your fellow employees and those who have not been called up to prepare.

Here are some of things that they say they learned: Get your personal documents—wills, power of attorney, and finances—in order. Set your spouse up for success in case anything bad happens. Make sure your spouse is constantly informed of what is going on and encourage him or her to participate in a family support group.

Your employer will tend to be the most challenging factor. Among the things to consider: Does your company know about the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act? Some airlines will have you turn in your ID, causing problems with nonrevenue travel and jumpseating. Some companies will make up the difference in your pay, if you take a pay cut when called to duty. Those companies should be commended for their support above and beyond. If that is not the case, make sure you have money put aside to cover any bills you will have to pay while deployed.

Medical benefits are another consideration. Some companies will take them away from you, and you will only be left with Tri-care. But if you can maintain your benefits, Tri-care will supplement whatever your employer does not cover.

Spouse travel benefits, although not as critical, still should be looked at. For example, Capt. Kaminicki was told that since he was deployed and on leave status, his wife could not travel internationally on an airline pass. Most soldiers rotate through Germany usually for training, and the ability to have your spouse fly as a nonrev passenger over can make the difference in your deployment.

Whatever problem you encounter, just remember people are out there to help. Feel free to contact the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve at [www.esgr.com](http://www.esgr.com) or at 1-800-336-4590, or the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service at [www.dol.gov/vets](http://www.dol.gov/vets), or check your yellow pages for your state office. 🌐