

# Air Force One and Air Force Two

## “SAM Fox” Travel

Written by: **Lori Y. Brown, Ed.D.**

Photography supplied by: **Leon Cardiff**



**Boeing 707, VC-137C – “Air Force One” – SAM 27000**

**Inset: Leon Cardiff enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at the young age of 18.**



### **Three Pounds**

When Oakland resident Leon Cardiff chose to enlist in the U.S. Air Force in 1969, he understood the dedication required to defend the values and mission of this branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. But at the young age of 18, he never expected this decision to serve his country would eventually have him embarking on a special mission—that of providing fast, safe, and reliable air transportation for the president and vice president of the United States, as well as other key leaders of the U.S. government.

According to rules and regulations of the draft on physical requirements at that time, Leon’s military journey should not have begun. He immediately faced a roadblock in meeting one of the Air Force’s enlistment prerequisites. He shared, “I was fortunate enough to even get into the Air Force because I actually did not weigh enough for my height. I had to get a waiver because I was three pounds underweight. I weighed 112 lbs, and there was a minimum requirement of 115 lbs.”

After enlistment and basic training, he was stationed in Tennessee, where he finished preparations as a ground radio operator and then served for 19 consecutive months in Vietnam. Leon’s first nine years of military service molded his dedication, commitment, and personal growth.

### **Special Duty**

Eventually being stationed at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska, Leon had his first experience in the area of national security. In this position, he handled long-range, high frequency radios, switchboards, and data

transmissions. In 1978, he began serving as an airborne radio operator/communications specialist, flying missions and standing alert duty aboard the National Emergency Airborne Command Post (pronounced “kneecap”).

In 1982, he received a special duty assignment to serve at Andrews Air Force Base in Prince George’s County. When Leon arrived there, his job transitioned to flying with government VIPs and handling on-board communications and avionics maintenance of aircrafts during transport. He indicated, “When I got to Andrews, I started flying on ‘low-level missions’—transporting congressional delegations on their fact-finding tours around the world.

We flew on the Boeing VC-135, which didn’t have a window at every seat for passengers to view the outside world.” These often were weekend trips to a place such as Lebanon or longer trips to places like New Zealand, Pakistan, or India. The journeys sometimes presented long crew days, having quick turn-around times to ensure congressional members and their staff returned to Washington for Monday morning meetings and schedules.

From there, Leon “moved up” to flying with senators, secretaries of state, and eventually, the vice president. To be considered for this assigned special duty required that an open position become available. Leon said this was a rarity: “At the time, anybody who got there, unless they made a very egregious mistake in their personal life or something of that nature, was there until they retired from the military.”

These missions became extremely busy ones for Leon. When he transitioned to the Boeing VC-137 aircraft (with windows for all passengers), his assignments often were secretary of state flights to the Middle East—shuttle diplomacy missions traveling between places like Tel Aviv, Cairo, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Onboard Teletype (TTY) devices transmitted and received typed information through electrical “pulses” over duplex high frequency radio channels. Typed characters were encrypted, decrypted, and then printed. Compared to modern electronic communication, TTY transmission rates were slow (under 100 words per minute).



Some of Leon’s memorabilia from Air Force One. Top left: 89th Vice Presidential Air Force Two Challenge coin; right: Air Force One Challenge coin; Middle: Sam Fox pin. Lower left: 75 Year Presidential Aircrew Air Service coin; Lower right: Sam Fox Challenge coin.

The communications team consisted of two (sometimes three) Communications Systems Operators (CSO). One CSO handled teletypesetting

of outgoing messages to agencies in Washington or embassies overseas while a second machine received incoming messages for the secretary of state. Simultaneously, another CSO handled voice communications with Andrews AFB, coordinated duplex high frequency data, and oversaw position reporting to air traffic control when a flight was over oceanic areas. With few satellites used for voice in the early 1980s, all communication with Washington on VIP flights occurred by high frequency radio.

### ***Special Air Mission (SAM Fox)***

Since 1943, the U.S. Air Force has fulfilled the key role of transporting the president and other high-ranking government officials around the world, in addition to transporting foreign dignitaries throughout the United States. Referred to as Special Air Mission (SAM) aircraft, these executive airlifts support travel requirements of presidents and their representatives, while also symbolizing the government, goals, and citizens of the United States.

Personnel of the U.S. Air Force’s 89th Airlift Wing, stationed at Joint Base Andrews, oversee operations. The term “SAM Fox” is part of the aircraft call sign. When combined with an aircraft tail number, this call sign differentiates VIP missions from other military and civilian flights. The term also sums up the extraordinary professionalism and dedication of the 89th Airlift Wing toward perfection in the execution of its mission. Ultimately, SAM Fox encompasses those serving our nation’s leaders and foreign dignitaries while being transported aboard SAM aircraft as well as the attitudes by



The second presidential aircraft, which served President Harry S. Truman, was known as *The Independence* in honor of Truman's hometown of Independence, MO.

which they serve. The “SAM Fox standard” is simply this, excellence in all and by all.

When the president is on board, the aircraft's call sign changes to “Air Force One.” This change was instituted in 1953, when President Eisenhower's plane *Columbine II* faced a near-collision as a result of two planes having the same call number and entering the same airspace. Air traffic controllers confused Eisenhower's plane *Air Force 8610* with commercial plane *Eastern 8610*.

### **SAM Aircraft**

SAM aircraft have a distinctive blue and white paint scheme, with the American flag displayed on the tail. Since redesign under the direction of President John F. Kennedy, the words “United States of America” also are exhibited on the plane's fuselage. When the President Airlift Group (PAG) transports the president on *Air Force One*, the Seal of the President of the United States is seen on the front area of the aircraft.

The first presidential aircraft, which served President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was the Douglas VC-54C Skymaster. The plane, officially named *The Flying White House*, acquired the unofficial nickname *Sacred Cow* because of its unique qualities and security features. In fact, a battery-powered elevator was installed at the rear of the plane for Roosevelt to board easily while in his wheelchair.

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman saw the introduction of a second aircraft—the Douglas VC-118, otherwise known as *The Independence*. This nickname was suggested

by the aircraft's pilot in honor of Truman's hometown of Independence, Missouri. One of the most historic flights made by this aircraft involved Truman's travels to Wake Island in the western Pacific Ocean to meet with General Douglas MacArthur for discussions about the Korean War.

A pilot himself, President Dwight D. Eisenhower flew on the Lockheed VC-121E from 1954-61. In honor of his wife Mamie, Eisenhower chose the name *Columbine III* after the official state flower of Colorado. Instead of traditional champagne to christen the plane, Mrs. Eisenhower used a bottle of water from Colorado,

the state where she had spent her formative years and where, at the age of 19, she married the future president.

The first jet propulsion aircraft built for presidential travel was the Boeing VC-137C, bearing the call sign “SAM Two-Six-Thousand” (tail number 26000). While “Air Force One” serves as the call sign of any U.S. Air Force aircraft carrying the president, the official call sign changes to “Air Force Two” when the vice president is being transported. In its history, SAM 26000 has carried eight presidents: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton. It also has the historical distinction of returning President Kennedy's casket to Washington after his assassination in Dallas, Texas. After 36 years of service and more than 13,000 flying hours, SAM 26000 was retired by the U.S. Air Force in 1998. It is now displayed as a walk-through exhibit at the National Museum of the Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

While additional aircraft, including smaller jets that maneuver tight runways, have continued to serve as transportation for the president and other high-ranking government officials, the highly customized Boeing 747-200B series jets, carrying tail codes 28000 and 29000, currently serve as “The Flying White House” for the president no matter where he is traveling.

### **Expert Trust**

The Latin phrase *experto crede*—trust in one experienced—is the official motto of the United States Air Force's 89th Airlift Wing. Personnel are part of a team, working together to provide all aspects of global transportation for



their nation's leaders. Leon is the first to admit that such an honor is not a one-person endeavor: "Even those people who don't fly—the ground people, the supply people, the maintenance individuals, the people who polish the planes, the people at finance, all the 'little people'—it took all of them to enable me to get on the airplane and accomplish the mission of safely and securely transporting our nation's leaders to every continent around the world."

He continued, "Every time the wheel of the aircraft would stop at the chalk mark at the destination airport, the second hand of the clock would also hit the designated time on the dot as to the arrival time of that mission. No matter what dignitary was being flown, the first impression of the blue and white aircraft from the United States of America set a tone of professionalism for those watching. Precision of accomplishing our mission was the goal



**Above: Leon on the steps of Air Force Two.**



**Left: Memorabilia from the Bush era.**

of all, whether it was a meal prepared, a comfort provided, or a ground party synchronizing their watches—all the little things that made each trip possible."

It truly did not matter who was inside the aircraft. The crew viewed every aspect of each SAM Fox flight as a representation of the United States of America around the world.

### **The Early Bush Era**

Some of Leon's most memorable experiences occurred while being on the campaign trail with then Vice President George H.W. Bush and Mrs. Bush in 1988. He remembered this as a hard, rigorous time—especially for the Bushes who were making approximately three campaign stops a day. During that time, though, Leon said the plane's atmosphere was always upbeat.

He recalled American country music artist Crystal Gayle being onboard, flying on a return trip from California. He chuckled, "She let her hair down, and it seemed like only being an inch from touching the floor!" Both country music fans, the Bushes also hosted Lee Greenwood, known for his signature song "God Bless the U.S.A."

One day when Vice President Bush was campaigning in Seattle, Washington, Leon mischievously concocted an idea. The movie *Cocktails*, featuring Bob Marley's version of "Don't Worry. Be Happy," had recently been released.

Leon went to a local record store and purchased the song (he was quick to note that these were days before artists took umbrage for utilizing their music). At the time, the plane's now-vintage cassette deck was tied into the communication system for "official" boarding music. On a cassette tape, he recorded both "God Bless the U.S.A." and "Don't Worry. Be Happy." As the plane began taxiing the runway, Leon pushed play! To the delight of the Bushes, the routine continued for several stops on the campaign trail. Leon still treasures this cassette, one of many items reminding him of the human side that exists alongside such a specialized journey.

Although the vice president was often busy with official duties, Mrs. Bush and he often interacted with the crew. Leon fondly recalls Mrs. Bush's exchanges, especially. He shared, "She always made everyone feel so relaxed when they were flying with her and providing a service to the vice president. She made everyone feel like we were part of the story." At times when she was ready to disembark the aircraft, Mrs. Bush would stop to chat with the crew. Innocently, she would tap a crew member's shoulder and

ask, “Do you know where we’re at?” The crew member politely would reply, “Yes, ma’am, we’re in Albuquerque” (or wherever they were at the time) to which she would quickly banter, “Ok, don’t go anywhere until we get back.”

This same congenial demeanor became notorious of Mrs. Bush’s character. On one flight, Leon had a book she had written titled *C. Fred’s Story: A Dog’s Life* tucked away, not to be seen. The book, written through the eyes of the Bush’s golden cocker spaniel, recounted Fred’s adventures as he traveled with the Bush family and met celebrities, royalty, and heads of state. When Mrs. Bush walked by, she asked Leon, “What are you reading?” He reluctantly pulled the book out and gave it to her. She flipped it open and said, “Hmmm, there’s something wrong with this book.” Turning to an aide, she asked, “Do we have Fred’s autograph with us?” The aide gave an affirmative nod, so Mrs. Bush asked Leon if she could borrow the book for Fred to autograph it. She then teased, “If you don’t mind, maybe we’ll even let the vice president sign it, too.”

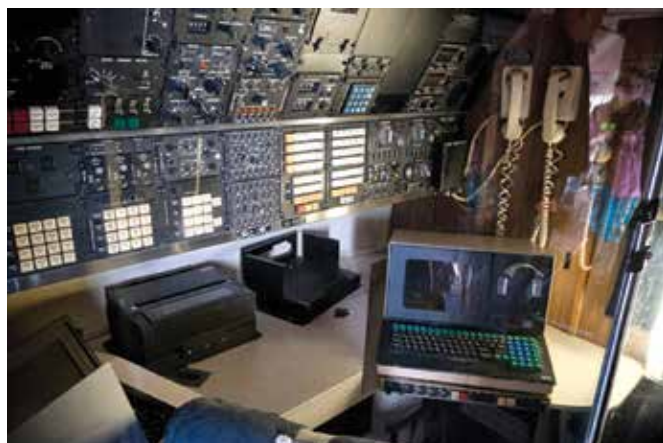
### ***The Golden Odyssey***

Each step of Leon’s military journey became a quest of the unknown filled with unique opportunities. On one trip to India and Nepal, U.S. Senator John Glenn (the first American to orbit the Earth when he circled it three times in 1962) was onboard. As the plane departed Katmandu, Glenn entered the cockpit area with his wife. He looked out the window and said, “So that’s what Mt. Everest looks like from down here!”

Leon’s last official flight, with then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, was dubbed “The Golden Odyssey” by its crew. This whirlwind trans-continental tour included stops in France, Portugal, Germany, England, Italy, Ireland, Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Australia. “Surprisingly enough,” Leon reflected, “we all sometimes know or tell ourselves when it’s time to retire and move on.”

But how did someone who has been to over 70 foreign countries and visited historic places such as Moscow’s Red Square, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, and the Pyramids of Giza arrive at a final destination of the western-most county of Maryland?

“As it turned out, I retired from the Air Force with over 20 years of service and then got a job at the U.S. Treasury Department for three years. At the time, my in-laws lived at Deep Creek Lake. My wife and I were living in Prince George’s County with our kids—one in elementary and the other in middle school.” After a little bit of thought and



**Top: While crossing the Atlantic on a congressional VC-135 trip to England, Congressman Dick Cheney from Wyoming, puts on Leon’s new rank of MSgt.**

**Bottom: Communications console on VC-137B aircraft.**

as part of a new adventure, his family decided to uproot and move west to Garrett County.

In 1999, Leon graduated from Frostburg State University, where he received a degree in history, 30 years after graduating high school and beginning his military service. Immersing himself in service to the Mountain Lake Park community, Leon has refereed local sporting events, operated a sporting goods store in Oakland for 10 years, and become an active member of Lions Clubs International. He shared, “Customer service was always a priority for me, something I had learned through my early years of work as a young person.”

This ethic is part of everything Leon approaches, whether in personal business, schooling, or military service. Leon admits some things in the world are changing because of technological advances, but the dedication to excellence as a team remains the unspoken credo of those who serve in branches of the military, especially those serving as the SAM Fox crew of the U.S. Air Force’s 89th Airlift Wing.