

# Air Force One: 'The Flying White House'

By CNN's Joe Havelly

**(CNN) --They are the ultimate executive jets.**

The twin Boeing 747s, popularly known as "Air Force One" are the flagships of the U.S. presidential fleet and the envy of prime ministers and presidents across the world.

The jets bristle with state-of-the-art communications equipment, anti-missile defenses (details of which are classified) and furnishings befitting the commander in chief of the world's most powerful country -- even the seat buckles carry the presidential seal.

Other leaders and heads of state may have their own lavishly appointed personal jets -- the jumbo belonging to Saudi Arabia's King Fahd reputedly has an ornamental fountain on board and China recently took delivery of its first dedicated presidential jet (complete with satellite controlled bugging devices, reports at the time said.)

But impressive as they may be, no jet can match the sheer jaw-dropping awe that surrounds Air Force One.

The mystique of the aircraft is such that to be offered a ride is considered a high diplomatic honor and is often used as a way of currying political favor or smoothing the path to getting that all-important treaty signed.

On every overseas visit, the looming presence of the so-called "Flying White House" coming in to land heralds the start of a massive security, press and transportation operation that accompanies the traveling president.

Any presidential tour is a military operation organized by the Presidential Airlift Group at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington and carried out with the precision -- and impenetrable jargon -- you would expect from the U.S. military.

Accompanying any tour are at least two C-5 Galaxy heavy transport aircraft carrying the president's bulletproof limousine, a stand-by limo, a fully fitted ambulance, occasionally his personal helicopter and -- for especially sensitive areas -- several additional limos for use as decoys.

Also flying with the president are a virtual battalion of secret service agents -- uniformed and plain clothed -- as well as their vehicles, and everything else the White House needs when it is on the move.

Added to that is the presidential press corps, with a rotating group of about a dozen journalists travelling in the press section at the back of Air Force One -- sustained during the journey by M&Ms provided in custom boxes complete with the presidential seal.

On most overseas tours the rest of the presidential press party follows aboard a considerably less luxurious, and often rather aged, charter jet.

All told, that adds up to a sizeable tour party -- on President Clinton's November 2000 visit to Vietnam for example, the holder of the most powerful office on the planet was accompanied by a delegation numbering well over 1,000.

## **Mistaken identity**

The term "Air Force One" itself is, however, something of a misnomer.

Strictly speaking (and there is no other way to speak in the U.S. military) the name refers to the call sign for any

U.S. Air Force plane used to carry the president.

On August 9, 1974 for example, shortly after Secretary of State Henry Kissinger read President Nixon's formal letter of resignation, air traffic control in Kansas received this message:

"Kansas city this is former Air Force One, please change our call sign to SAM27000."

The man onboard was no longer president and the aircraft, mid-flight, was therefore no longer deemed "Air Force One."

Today the presidential fleet includes several aircraft, other than the two 747s, that from time to time carry the "Air Force One" call sign.

The presidential helicopter, operated by the Marine Corps and often seen ferrying the president to and from the South Lawn of the White House, is known as "Marine One", and on the rare occasion the president travels by Army aircraft that is known as "Army One."

By the same logic, aircraft used to carry the vice president are given the call sign "Air Force Two."

Air Force One as a call sign was first used by the military for presidential flights in the 1950s, but the first aircraft to become popularly known as Air Force One was a Boeing 707 used by President John F. Kennedy in the early 60s.

That aircraft -- tail number 26000 -- was also witness to perhaps the greatest historic moments of any presidential aircraft to date.

It was onboard 26000 that Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn into the presidency as he accompanied Kennedy's body back to Washington following that fateful visit to Dallas in November 1963.

The same aircraft, refitted to his tastes, was used by President Nixon on his ground-breaking visit to China in 1972 and for another visit to Moscow later that year.

## **Fact from fiction**

Over the years, the various "Air Force Ones" have had their fair share of Hollywood screen roles.

For example, the technological wizardry onboard the present 747s got wide play in the 1997 Harrison Ford action movie "Air Force One", in which the president's jet is hijacked by Russian nationalists.

However, many of the more outlandish gizmos featured in the film owed more to, shall we say, artistic license than to airborne fact.

The plane for example has no escape pod -- at least, that is what the Air Force says; although they may be working on one.

Nor is it equipped with parachutes -- the massive slipstream created by an aircraft the size of a 747 means they can't be used.

Nonetheless, the heavily modified jets, labeled "the safest aircraft in the world" by the U.S. military are distant technological relatives to the more run of the mill jumbos that ply the world's skies.

Air Force One, says CNN Senior White House Correspondent John King, "is a military jet in the true sense of the word."

Designed to operate as independently as possible from ground services, the aircraft can fly half way around the world without refueling.

Both Boeings carry their own automated baggage loaders as well as built-in front and aft stairs enabling them to operate self-sufficiently at airports and airfields around the world, minimizing security risks.

Capable of in-flight refueling from airborne tankers, the manufacturers say the aircraft has "virtually unlimited range" -- its passengers sustained by galleys capable of storing up to 2,000 meals at a time.

To keep the president in constant contact with staff and military chiefs back in Washington, the aircraft are fitted with some 80 telephones and 383 kilometers (238 miles) of cabling twice the amount found in a standard 747.

All that wiring and indeed the entire aircraft is shielded against the effects of electromagnetic pulse -- a wave of energy generated by the detonation of a nuclear device that can disable unprotected electronics.

The inside of the aircraft features private accommodation, office space and a workout room for the president, first lady and family; as well as accommodation and offices for support staff and security personnel.

Also on board is a stateroom and conference rooms that can, should it ever be necessary, be converted into a fully functional airborne medical center.

Should the unthinkable happen, somebody has already thought of it.

Of course, all this doesn't come cheap, although the actual cost of running the presidential fleet and of overseas visits is classified.

But when the president travels the world it is not always money that is the first consideration.

When the president goes overseas it is to assert America's influence as a global superpower -- and there are few more imposing and impressive displays of America's prestige than Air Force One.

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/10/22/airforce.one/index.html>

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 Cable News Network.