



P  **PPIN'**
S M O K E

GUIDE *to*
MILITARY
SPACE-A TRAVEL



2 BONUS CHAPTERS!

By Stephanie Montague

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INTRODUCTION

As a member of the U.S. military community, you have access to many amazing benefits and privileges. One of the coolest – and most under-utilized – is space-available (Space-A) travel.

Traveling Space-A means you are using resources that have extra capacity after space-required travelers or those on official duty have been accommodated. It gives you access to free flights, convenient base lodging, and incredible military recreation facilities all over the world.

In this Guide to Military Space-A Travel you will learn:

- The step-by-step process for taking a Space-A flight.
- How to dress and pack when flying on a military aircraft.
- Everything you need to know about flying Space-A on the popular Patriot Express (a.k.a “the rotator”).
- How to reserve rooms in military lodging . . . even when the DOD lodging website says “no availability.”
- Answers to the most frequently asked questions about Space-A travel.

The bonus chapters include tips for flying Space-A with kids and some beyond-the-basics strategies for flying Space-A that we’ve learned from taking military hops around the globe.

The information in this Guide is simple and easy to read, but it is all informed by Department of Defense policy, rules, and regulations. It is also validated through our personal experiences traveling Space-A.

Most of what’s in this Guide is also available at <https://www.poppin smoke.com>. I developed this offline resource so that you have a convenient way to access the basic information you need to know about Space-A travel. You can download this e-book and read it, even when WiFi is not available, and use it as a quick reference while planning your Space-A flights and lodging. **Please check the online version (linked at the end of each chapter) periodically to ensure you have the most recent updates.**

Please share this Guide as widely as possible to help fellow members of our military community learn about Space-A travel!

About Poppin’ Smoke

I created Poppin’ Smoke for members of the military community – particularly retirees – to help you take advantage of the travel-related benefits and privileges you’ve earned through your service.

You will find extensive information related to Space-A travel along with the many military recreation facilities worldwide that are yours to use. You can also get ideas and inspiration from the profiles of military retirees who are living and traveling abroad. Finally, Poppin' Smoke will help you plan other aspects of your travel, including packing, getting around, and finding convenient, affordable off-base lodging.

The Name “Poppin’ Smoke”

Army folks probably figured this one out, but members of other services may not be familiar with the expression “pop smoke.” It means to get moving or take off. That’s exactly what you can do with your travel-related military benefits!

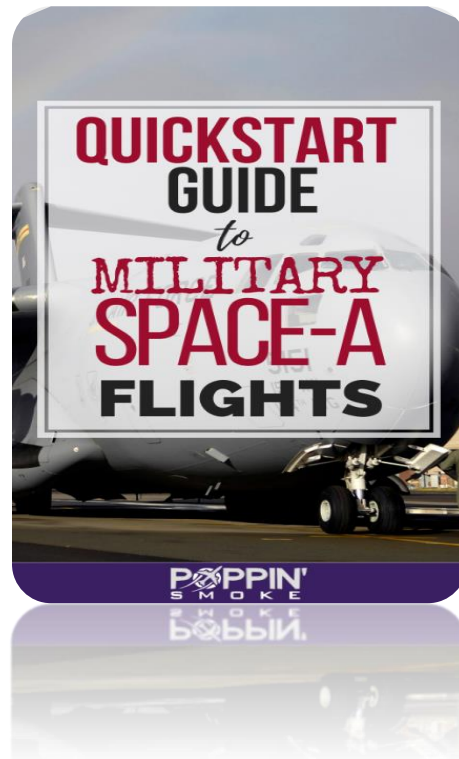
You may recognize the purple in the Poppin’ Smoke logo as the color of Joint Forces. That color is a reminder that these benefits are available to service members, retirees, family members, and eligible veterans from all branches of service . . . and that you can use the facilities and resources on all bases: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard!

Ready to pop smoke? Let’s move out!



Stephanie Montague is the founder and President of Poppin' Smoke. She has a BA in Economics and French from the University of Michigan and an MBA from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. Stephanie has been traveling and living abroad with her husband since he retired from the Army in 2015. They fly Space-A on military aircraft and use military facilities all over the world. Prior to her life of travel, Stephanie was a management consultant and marketing professional. You can contact her at stephanie@poppinSmoke.com.

CHAPTER 1



Military Space-A flights have been a major element of our strategy for saving money on our frequent travels since my husband retired from the Army in 2015. We've flown Space-A to Europe, Hawaii, Japan, Korea, and many places within the continental U.S. I estimate that during our last 7+ years of world travel, we've saved more than \$20,000 by taking military hops. Our experiences have been overwhelmingly positive, and whenever it's a viable option, Space-A is my preferred way to fly.

Before you can get out there and take your first Space-A flight, you must understand how the entire process works. Flying Space-A on military aircraft is very different from commercial air travel; there's much more to it than simply calling a military passenger terminal and "booking" a flight. But it's well worth learning how Space-A works so that you can take advantage of this incredible privilege available to eligible members of the military community.

How Space-A Flights Work

Space-A flights, a.k.a "MAC flights" or "military hops," are military operational flights that have extra seats. The military mission is the priority, and the Space-A passengers are essentially cargo. Eligible travelers may "hop" the flight (free of charge), but the system is based on priority.

Space-A Travel Categories

Travelers are divided into six categories or “Cats”: 1 is the highest priority and 6 is the lowest.

Available seats on the aircraft are first offered to travelers in lower-numbered categories. Any remaining seats can be used by travelers in higher-numbered (lower priority) categories. Priority within a category is based on signup date, as discussed below.

In the context of leisure travel, active duty service members on accompanied environmental and morale leave (EML) are Cat 2 and on regular leave are Cat 3. Unaccompanied dependents are Cat 4 or Cat 5, depending on the circumstances. Military retirees, Reservists, veterans with a permanent service-connected disability rated as total (100% disabled veterans), and surviving spouses of deceased service members/retirees are Cat 6.

Certain travelers within Cat 6 have restrictions on where they can fly Space-A. Reservists, “Gray Area” retirees (retired Guardsmen and Reservists who served 20 years but are under the age of 60) and 100% disabled veterans who are not also retired from the military are not eligible to fly Space-A to foreign countries. They can take military hops within the continental United States (CONUS) and to/from Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, and other U.S. territories.

Surviving spouses are only eligible to fly Space-A within CONUS.

Please note that the list above is not exhaustive. Other passengers are eligible to use military space-available travel under various circumstances. For more information on eligibility by category, view [Table 3 in Section 4.11 of DOD Instruction 4515.13](#).

Military Dependent Space-A Travel

Dependents of active duty service members are eligible to fly Space-A without their sponsor under certain [circumstances explained here](#).

Dependents of retirees, 100% disabled veterans, and surviving spouses are eligible to fly Space-A, but only when accompanied by their sponsor.

The following dependents and family members are NOT eligible to fly Space-A at all:

- Ex-spouses of service members or retirees
- A service member’s or retiree’s parents, siblings, or any other family members who are not the sponsor’s dependents

Dependent children can fly Space-A with their sponsor or eligible unaccompanied parent. They are not authorized to travel with other military families.

Pets may not fly Space-A unless they are registered service animals.

The Space-A Flying Process: How to Take a Military Hop

Here is a summary of the process of flying Space-A. For more details and links to the required forms, visit the [Air Mobility Command \(AMC\) website](#).

1. Space-A Signup

Sign up with every passenger terminal from which you might originate travel (including your destination). Keep in mind that you are not signing up for a particular flight. You are signing up to compete for any flight with Space-A seats at a given terminal.

You can sign up in one of several different ways:

- Via e-mail
- Using the Take-a-Hop app (the app has a one-time cost of \$6.99)
- Through the [AMC website's online form](#)
- In person at the terminal

E-mail and the Take-a-Hop app allow you to sign up with multiple terminals at once. If you sign up via e-mail, you must include all of the information listed in the Space-A Sign-Up section of the [AMC website's Space-Available Travel page](#).

Many terminals will not reply to confirm receipt of your signup. Remember to retain and print copies of the e-mails you send, because they serve as proof of your signup date.

Priority within a Space-A category is based on signup date, so the earlier you sign up (maximum 60 days before your travel date at most locations, 45 days or less at some Navy locations), the better. Active duty cannot sign up for Space-A travel until they are on leave. [Click here for Space-A signup tips and examples specific to retirees.](#)

2. Tracking Space-A Flight Schedules

Track flights (also referred to as “missions”) from your desired departure base(s). Flight schedules and tentative seat counts are posted up to 72 hours before a flight. If you monitor flights out of your departure base for several weeks or months prior to travel, you may see patterns in how often they have missions to particular destinations and how many Space-A passengers get seats.

Most military passenger terminals maintain a web page on which they publish their flight schedules for the upcoming 3 days. A Space-A flight schedule lists the destinations, anticipated number of Space-A seats, and the “Roll Call” time, which is the time at which passenger terminal staff announce the names of passengers selected for the flight. Many passenger terminals also publish data on recently-departed flights, including the number of Space-A seats released.

You can also obtain information on Space-A seats by calling the terminal directly.

[Click here for a detailed explanation](#) of where to find Space-A flight schedules and how to read them.

3. Check-In or “Marking Yourself Present”

Within 24 hours of your target flight’s Roll Call, go to the terminal and speak with the staff to mark yourself present. Bring your military ID, passport (if traveling to/from a foreign country), and any required paperwork, such as your leave form if you are active duty or the memo from your sponsor’s command if you are a [dependent traveling unaccompanied](#).

You should also bring a copy of your signup e-mail in case the terminal does not have you in their system. Most terminals will accept your e-mail as proof of your signup date and time.

You must mark yourself present *before* Roll Call starts. As long as you have signed up in advance, there is no advantage to marking yourself present earlier than other passengers. Arriving one or two hours prior to Roll Call is usually sufficient, but in the 12 hours or so before your flight, check the schedules frequently to ensure Roll Call hasn’t changed.

Many passenger terminals have a screen or printed document near the terminal desk with a list of passengers who are marked present and are “competing” for the flight. Make sure your name is on that list along with the accurate number of dependents traveling with you and your correct date of signup. If not, speak with the terminal staff.

4. Roll Call

The time listed on the [Space-A flight schedule](#) is usually the Roll Call time. When Roll Call begins, terminal staff announce how many Space-A seats are available and read the names of the passengers selected. They begin with the passengers in the lowest-numbered (highest priority) category and work their way down the list.

When they call your name, report to the desk and confirm that you and any dependents traveling with you are present. Show your and your dependents’ military ID cards along with the aforementioned paperwork.

DoD uniformed services ID cards are required for all passengers over the age of 14. If you are traveling with children younger than 14 who do not have a DoD ID card, they must have a federal, state, local, or tribal government-issued ID.

After Roll Call, you might go directly to luggage check, or you may wait several more hours, but you won’t know the schedule in advance. At the time of Roll Call, you must be in the terminal with all of your luggage. Don’t plan on waiting until after Roll Call to go back to your hotel or return your rental car, because you might not have time.

Note: If you’re not selected during Roll Call, stay in the terminal, at least until the flight boards. Sometimes additional Space-A seats are released at the very last minute.

Virtual Roll Call

Some passenger terminals offer Virtual Roll Call (VRC) for select missions. In theory, having VRC means passengers do not have to be present at the terminal for Roll Call. When there is a VRC for a particular flight, that information is noted on the flight schedule.

With VRC, you must still go to the terminal within 24 hours of Roll Call to mark yourself present (and verify that they have your e-mail address). About an hour before the in-person Roll Call, the terminal sends you a “Roll Call Notification” e-mail. If you don’t respond promptly, they take you out of the running. If you do respond, they eventually send you one of two e-mails: a “Flight Selection Notification” with instructions to go directly to the terminal to check your bags, or a “Non-Selection Notification,” which means you should activate Plan B (**always have a Plan B** when flying Space-A!).

In our limited experiences with VRC, it has not worked quite as planned. We had to go to the terminal for Roll Call anyway. VRC is a relatively new process, so they may still be working out the kinks. In the meantime, showing up in person is the best way to ensure you don’t miss any communication.

5. Bag Check

When it’s time to check bags, you, your dependents, and all of your luggage must be present.

On most flights, each passenger can check two bags of up to 70 lbs each. You can also check car seats, which do not count towards your baggage allowance. On some smaller aircraft, weight limits may be as low as 30 lbs. If you cannot meet those requirements on the weight-restricted aircraft, you are not eligible for the flight. (Hint: packing light is an advantage!)

You cannot access your checked luggage during the flight, even though you may see it strapped down right in front of you. Make sure you have everything you’ll need in your carry-on bag

During baggage check, you can request a meal, (if meals are offered — usually a box lunch with sandwich, chips, cookie, and drink), which costs \$5-\$10, depending on the base.

After you’ve checked your bags and have your boarding passes, you are “manifested” on the flight. Terminal staff will tell you the estimated boarding time, but keep in mind that it often changes without notice, so stay in the terminal.

6. Boarding

When boarding begins, all passengers go through security. Military passenger terminals follow TSA regulations, so you have the same restrictions for carry-on items as on

civilian planes. You sit in a secure area of the terminal until it's time to board. At most locations, a bus takes you to the aircraft, and you board the plane from the tarmac.

If you are on a Patriot Express flight, your boarding pass will list your assigned seat, as explained in Chapter 3. On other Space-A aircraft, you select your own seats on a first-come, first-served basis. The crew may allow passengers with small children to board first, but not always.

7. Flight

Unless you are on a Patriot Express, which has full in-flight service, most Space-A flights are “no-frills.” The crew provides foam earplugs, water, and sometimes chips or cookies, but you must get those refreshments yourself. Depending on the type of aircraft and how crowded it is, you may be able to stretch out across a few seats or even sleep on the floor (see the section on Military Aircraft below).

8. Arriving at Your Destination

After landing, you take a bus from the aircraft to the terminal, where you collect your checked bags. Passenger terminals generally have information and phone numbers for local rental cars, base lodging, and other resources.

You can also use [UJ Space A Info](#) to quickly search for local information related to any base in the world.

If you've flown to a foreign country, you may pass through customs, or you may have to go to an off-site location to have your passport stamped. The process varies by country and base.

Use [Poppin' Smoke's Space-A Location Guides](#) to research the customs and immigration process at your destination. The Guides also have detailed information about lodging, ground transportation, and other logistics for major Space-A hubs worldwide.

When (and When Not) to Fly Space-A

So now you know how Space-A flights work when all goes smoothly. Of course, it doesn't always happen that way.

There are many situations when flying Space-A is not the best option. If you are going on a short vacation (less than 2 weeks) with little flexibility or you are [traveling during major holidays](#), relying on Space-A is risky. Most experienced Space-A travelers also avoid flying Space-A during summer PCS season (late May through early September), particularly to destinations outside the continental United States (OCONUS).

If you are traveling solo, you have a better chance of getting a seat, even during busy periods. Many other Space-A travelers are couples or families, and even if those groups are in a higher category, when there is only one seat left, a solo traveler will get it.

Packing light also increases your chances of getting a seat. Some flights have baggage weight restrictions that will take most other passengers out of the running.

You can take some of the risk out of flying Space-A and boost your chances of having a successful trip by following the tips and strategies in Chapter 7 and by monitoring the **flight schedules** to make informed decisions about what flights are most promising.

How to Prepare for Space-A Travel

Knowing what to expect at the passenger terminal and on the planes will help you have a more comfortable journey.

What to Expect at Military Passenger Terminals

Passenger terminals vary widely in terms of their hours, services available, and rules. Some have a USO, a snack bar, a children's area, and showers, while others have little more than a check-in desk and a few chairs. **SpaceA.net** has information on specific services available at each terminal.

Most terminals discourage passengers from getting too comfortable and falling asleep. The chairs generally have fixed armrests that prevent you from stretching out across the seats. Also, there are often signs requesting that you not lie on the floor. Be prepared with a good book and plenty of activities for the kiddos!

Many military passenger terminals have WiFi, but it's not always strong, so remember to download books, movies, or activities ahead of time.

Finally, keep in mind that most passenger terminals are NOT open 24 hours, so you cannot spend the night there. Even if you arrive on an aircraft that has an overnight layover, staying in the terminal is not an option. See Chapter 4 to read tips and tricks for reserving base lodging.

What to Wear and Bring on Military Aircraft

Depending on the type of aircraft and how it's configured, you have different considerations for comfort. If it's a Patriot Express, as explained in Chapter 3, it's simply a regular passenger plane. Most other Space-A flights are "organic aircraft," a.k.a. military planes. For all organic aircraft, two tips apply:

- Dress in layers. It can be very cold or very warm, depending on the type of aircraft, where you're sitting, and pilot preference. I occasionally see passengers (especially children) wearing shorts, but I don't recommend it unless you have a pair of sweatpants handy.
- Bring a **small, inflatable mat** and a blanket or sleeping bag. You can use an inflatable mat to lie on the floor or stretch out across multiple seats. The blanket/sleeping bag is important for warmth.

- Bring hand wipes. The lavatory sinks generally don't have running water. Instead, there is a pile of antiseptic wipes, but often not enough to last for the entire flight.

[Click here for a full Space-A packing list](#) or see Chapter 2.

While you could fly on one of more than a dozen different types of aircraft, the ones below are the most common:

C-5: This is the largest aircraft in the Air Force. If the 72-hr schedule indicates there are 73 seats available, the aircraft is probably a C-5. Seats are configured just like a commercial airplane, but they face the rear of the aircraft, and you have more legroom. If the plane isn't crowded and you are lucky enough to have your own row, you can stretch out (unlike in the passenger terminals, you can raise the armrests!).

C-17: The first time we traveled Space-A on a C-17, all passengers were sitting in jump seats along the sides of the aircraft (facing the middle). With this configuration, you can lie down after the plane reaches altitude if there is room on the floor and the crew authorizes you to do so. On our [first flight to Germany](#) we didn't plan ahead and had to sleep on a wool blanket provided by the crew (it was still more comfortable than sitting in the economy section of a commercial flight).

The next time we flew a C-17 with that configuration, we were prepared with a couple of inflatable pool rafts. The rafts provided much more cushion than the wool blankets and were pretty inexpensive. Unfortunately, they were exhausting to blow up and nearly impossible to drain and fold down to an easily-transportable size.

Now we use [this small easily-inflatable sleeping pad](#). It weighs only 18.6 oz, inflates with 10 – 15 breaths, and easily deflates to fit back in its carrying bag.

We also flew a C-17 configured with regular passenger seats filling most of the bay. Some passengers chose to sit along the sides anyway, but we preferred real seats to jump seats. With that configuration, there was very little space to lie on the floor.

C-130: This a prop plane, so it is noisier, slower, and bumpier than a C-17. It has the same open bay configuration with web seating along the sides. If there is room on the floor, you can lie down like on a C-17.

KC-10/KC-135: These are tankers used to fuel jets while in the air, and they may perform that mission with Space-A passengers aboard. The KC-10 usually has regular airline seats and about twice the passenger capacity of the KC-135. The latter generally has web seating along the sides of the aircraft.

[Click here to read](#) about our Space-A journey from Japan to Germany. We flew in KC-135s the whole way!

“VIP” Aircraft (C-9/C-12/C-21/C-40): These aircraft have regular passenger seats. The baggage weight limit is generally much lower (usually 30 lbs. for C-12 and C-21, 50 lbs. for C-9 and C-40) due to aircraft baggage storage limitations and/or fuel requirements to the destination.

Final Advice

Think of Space-A travel as an adventure. Along the way, you will meet other travelers who remind you how helpful and supportive the military community can be. Hitching a ride with a military mission is a privilege and, for dependents who have never flown in a military aircraft, a very unique experience. If you think of your journey in this way, you will be better-prepared to handle any parts of the process that don't go as planned.

* * * [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

CHAPTER 2



Getting ready to take a military hop? Make sure you have everything you need to be comfortable, entertained, and travel-ready! Here's how you can prepare for your Space-A flight.

Documentation

Before going to the terminal, ensure you have proper identification and paperwork. Requirements depend on your Space-A category and reason for travel.

- **Military ID:** All travelers age 14 or older need a military ID card. If you are traveling with children under 14 years old who do not have a military ID card, they must have a federal, state, local, or tribal government-issued ID.
- **Passport:** If you are traveling to/from another country, bring your passport. When visiting U.S. territories in the Pacific (e.g. Guam), you don't need a passport, but it's a good idea to bring yours, just in case. You may need to hop a flight via a foreign country. The same advice applies if you have a no-fee passport from an overseas duty station; bring a regular passport as well.
- **Tourist Visa:** If you plan to visit a foreign country during your travels, [check to see whether you need a visa.](#)
- **Ordinary Leave or Environmental and Morale Leave (EML) Form:** Active duty travelers must bring the applicable form and supply it when marking themselves present.

- **Unaccompanied Dependent Travel Memo:** Dependents traveling without their sponsor must have authorization from their sponsor's command. [Click here for details and sample memos.](#)
- **Copies of Your Signup E-mails:** The e-mails you sent to the passenger terminals serve as proof of the date and time of your signup. Most terminals will accept an electronic copy, but it doesn't hurt to have everything printed out.

You may have other documentation requirements, depending on your status. See section 4.8 of [DOD Instructions 4515.13](#) for a full list.

What to Wear on a Space-A Flight

The key to staying comfortable on a Space-A flight is to dress in layers. Most military planes are quite cold, but the temperature varies, depending on the type of aircraft and where you're sitting. You may also spend several hours waiting in the terminal, so dress in a way that makes it easy to adjust.

When flying Space-A, we dress as we do for a day of outdoor activity: layers of lightweight, breathable clothing. Everything we wear is dual-purpose, meaning we can wear it at multiple points during our trip. Dressing that way [helps us pack light](#).

Note: Click on the underlined links to the online version of this article to see photos and detailed descriptions.

Layer #1: Lightweight Shirt

Our first layer is usually a [long-sleeved shirt like this one](#). It's made of "wicking" material that dries quickly, so it's great for travel, hiking, outdoor exercise, or a day exploring a new city.

Layer #2: Thin Fleece Jacket or Vest

The second layer is a thin fleece jacket. Don't wear anything too heavy, because it defeats the purpose of layering. [This micro fleece jacket](#) is perfect.

If you tend to get hot easily, wear a vest rather than a jacket for your second layer. Again, choose something light that's not too bulky, because there are two more layers coming! [A vest like this](#) one is perfect.

When selecting a jacket or vest, look for zipper pockets, which are more secure for travel!

Layer #3: Lightweight Insulated Jacket

This is another warm, yet very lightweight layer. You can stuff [a jacket like this](#) into the smallest space in your backpack. I bought a size up, because I knew I would be wearing it over other layers.

Layer #4 Windbreaker

The fourth and final layer is a windbreaker. It keeps out the chill and fits easily over the other layers. In the spirit of making everything I pack dual-purpose, I look for a coat that is also waterproof or at least water resistant. I prefer men's windbreakers like this one because they are roomier across the back and tend to run longer.

Other Clothing

Next on the list: pants! Don't wear shorts, and don't let your kids wear them. There's no rule that says you must wear pants, but military aircraft are way too cold for bare legs.

There IS a rule about what type of shoes you can wear: they must have closed heels and toes. In other words, no Crocs, sandals, or flip-flops. High heels are also not allowed.

If your hands and feet get cold easily, bring gloves and extra socks.

Remember that you will not have access to your checked baggage – even if you can see it on the pallet in front of you – during the flight. Any clothing you may need must be on your body or in your carry-on bag.

What to Bring

Plan ahead for comfort to keep yourself and your family entertained!

Small, Lightweight Sleeping Pad/Mattress

This is a must if you hop a C-17 or other cargo plane and can lie on the floor during the flight. Having a sleeping pad is the difference between stretching out in relative comfort and sitting bolt upright while strapped into webbed seating along the sidewalls of the aircraft.

Of course, you may not know in advance what type of aircraft you'll get, so you want a sleeping pad that is not too cumbersome in case you can't use it. We have this Klymit sleeping pad, which rolls up to 3" x 8" and weighs slightly more than a pound. It fits in the side pocket of our backpacks, and we can blow it up in fewer than 15 breaths.

Klymit makes several other sleeping pads, some of which are insulated and/or larger than the model we have. They all come in a few different colors.

Travel Pillow

No matter what type of aircraft you're in, you need a travel pillow, and it's best to have one that does double-duty. Use the neck pillow configuration when you're sitting upright (Patriot Express, C-5, KC-10) and the rectangular shape when you're lying down (C-17). This pillow is light as a feather and snaps onto your backpack.

Travel Blanket or Sleeping Bag

It's usually very cold on a military aircraft, and a light cover will help you sleep more comfortably. **This one can be used as a sleeping bag** or unzipped to make a large blanket, so it's useful on any type of aircraft. The compression bag shrinks it down to fit in the palm of your hand.

Ear Protection

Military aircraft are extremely loud, and you need ear protection. The flight crew supplies foam earplugs, but if you also want to listen to music or watch movies, **get noise-canceling headphones**.

Quick-Dry Microfiber Towel

When hopping to/from OCONUS destinations, you may want to take advantage of the shower facilities offered at certain passenger terminals. Between the time you spend waiting in the terminal and your time in the air, you can easily go two days or more without staying in proper lodging. Stow a **quick-dry towel like this one** in your carry-on so that you can easily shower at the first opportunity, whether that's in the terminal or at the base fitness facility.

Water Bottle

Except on the Patriot Express, the only "amenity" on a Space-A flight is a self-serve keg of water. Everyone traveling with you should have a water bottle. **These bottles** have a locking lid, which keeps the spout clean and prevents spills. The lid pops open with a press of the button, meaning you don't need to touch the spout with dirty hands. I also like them because they are narrow enough to fit in the side pocket of a backpack.

Kindle or Other E-Reader

One of the best ways to save space (and weight) in your suitcase is to store all of your books in an e-reader. It gives you a choice of reading material, including books, newspapers, and magazines. You can also add travel guidebooks to your e-reader and leave your copies of Rick Steve's at home!

The Kindle Paperwhite is great because it has a soft backlight, so you can read in the dark without waking other passengers. Don't forget to download plenty of reading material in advance. Many military passenger terminals do not have good WiFi.

Portable Charger

Keep your electronic devices powered up with a **small, lightweight, portable charger**. When dozens of people are competing for a handful of outlets in the terminal, it's best to have your own power source. Some aircraft have outlets, but don't count on it.

For the Kids: Movies and Games

Traveling with the kiddos? Keep them occupied during long waits in the terminal and on overseas flights. **The Fire Tablet Kids Edition** is a great choice, because it comes with a sturdy plastic frame, 10 hours of battery life, and tons of storage.

Remember to download movies, game and activities in advance. As noted above, don't rely on passenger terminal WiFi.

See Chapter 6 to read more tips for flying Space-A with kids!

Other Essentials

Carabiner/D-Ring Clips: Attach a couple of these to your backpack, and I guarantee you will find multiple uses for them. They come in handy on cargo flights, because you can clip items to the webbed seating so that they don't slide away with aircraft movement. You can also use them to hang water bottles, neck pillows, etc. from your backpack.

Mini Flashlight: With only two or three small windows, many military aircraft are dark after takeoff. Bring a small flashlight so you can search through your bag and walk through the plane without tripping over the many tie-downs or cables holding cargo in place. Choose a flashlight that stays illuminated by itself so you can have your hands free.

Snacks: Bring plenty of food. At some terminals, you can purchase a boxed meal for less than \$10 per person, but you won't receive the meals until you're onboard. Don't count on purchasing food at the terminal; some terminals don't have food service options, and those that do often have limited hours.

Hand Wipes: Most aircraft lavatories don't have running water. They often provide antiseptic wipes or sanitizing gel, but it's best to have your own supply of wipes, especially when traveling with kids!

So, there you have it. Bring everything on this list, and you should be good to go for your next Space-A flight.

* * * **[Click here](#)** to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

CHAPTER 3



Have you ever heard reference to the “Patriot Express,” “rotator,” or “Cat B flight” and wondered what it was? It’s one of many possible aircraft you may “hop” when flying military Space-A, and some seasoned Space-A travelers would argue that there’s no better way to travel!

The Patriot Express (PE) is a commercial charter flight contracted by the Department of Defense to transport passengers on official military duty and their families. As with other Space-A flights, extra seats on the PE may be available for non-duty passengers after all space-required passengers have been accommodated.

Here’s what else Space-A passengers flying on a PE should know.

*NOTE: If you are PCSing on orders, you are not flying Space-A, even if you are on a PE. **This brochure** explains many of the rules that duty passengers need to know and describes the aircraft’s amenities.*

1. The Patriot Express is a regular commercial aircraft.

After you board the plane, the experience is similar to a commercial flight. Your boarding pass will have an assigned seat, and there are civilian flight attendants. The PE has full in-flight meal service and other standard amenities, such as movies. It’s also warmer and quieter than military cargo planes.

2. The signup process is the same for the Patriot Express as for other Space-A flights.

When you sign up for Space-A travel, you are signing up to fly from a particular passenger terminal; you are not signing up for an individual flight. If you've signed up at Norfolk, for example, you can take whatever flight has available seats on the day you want to travel. It could be a PE, or it could be a C-17.

3. You will pay a small fee to fly Space-A on the Patriot Express.

This fee is charged per passenger (no age minimum) and covers head tax and inspection fees. The amount varies depending on where you're traveling to/from but maxes out at around \$36 for flights from outside the continental U.S. (OCONUS) to within the continental U.S. (CONUS). Make sure you have cash in U.S. dollars; the passenger terminal may not accept credit cards.

4. Patriot Express schedules are posted for one calendar month at a time.

Most terminals post the monthly PE schedule as early as a week before the upcoming month and as late as a few days after the month starts.

Keep in mind that the monthly PE schedules do NOT tell you how many Space-A seats are available. As with other Space-A flights, the passenger terminals share information about seats on the PE a maximum of 72 hours in advance.

5. Patriot Express flights have standard routes and schedules.

PE routes and schedules generally don't change month-to-month except in the case of delays, maintenance, or weather issues. Some missions may also change or run less frequently during the year-end holidays.

Please [visit the online version of this chapter](#) to see the most current information about PE routes and schedules.

6. The terminal may conduct two Roll Calls for a Patriot Express flight.

If you are competing for a PE that originated at another location, the terminal staff may conduct two roll calls: one after the plane lands at your location and another after the check-in time for the last space-required passenger.

For example, if you are at Yokota AB awaiting a PE to Seattle that originated at Osan AB, the Yokota passenger terminal will conduct the first Roll Call after the plane from Osan arrives. At that point, they have a rough estimate of Space-A seats. The second Roll Call takes place after the deadline for space-required passengers (i.e. active duty service members who are PCSing) to check in.

Don't leave the terminal until after the second Roll Call. Better yet, wait until the plane has boarded; sometimes seats open up at the last minute.

7. The Patriot Express can be the most efficient way to fly Space-A to certain destinations.

As with most Space-A flights, when hopping a PE, it is possible to manifest all the way to the last place the mission is flying. Even if the aircraft stops in other locations along the way, you do not need to re-compete for Space-A seats. This option is convenient on the PE, because you can obtain confirmed seats all the way to destinations that would otherwise require you to compete multiple times along the way in some very busy locations.

For example, if your final destination is Kadena AB, and you get a seat on the PE from Seatac, you will stop at Yokota and Iwakuni along the way. Since you are manifested to Kadena, you can relax during Roll Call. You cannot be bumped by Space-A passengers competing at the other two locations, even if they are in a lower-numbered (higher priority) category. You *could* lose your seat to a duty passenger.

Flying Space-A to Japan can take longer if you're not on the PE. While you might get a direct flight from Travis, another option is piecing together a route that could include Hawaii and Guam. If you must compete for flights at both locations, your journey may take a few days or longer.

Noted: if you are manifested on a PE, verify that your boarding pass lists the correct final destination.

Keep in mind that the PE is not always the best choice. The efficiency and relative comfort make the PE very popular with Space-A travelers, so it is usually very competitive to get seats, as explained below. But when flying Space-A, it's important to know your options!

8. The Patriot Express is the best Space-A option for travelers with mobility issues.

While the standard advice when flying Space-A is to **take the first flight you can get**, travelers who use a cane/walker or wheelchair have different considerations. Passengers with mobility issues may have difficulty boarding certain military aircraft.

For example, on windy days when it's unsafe to use the 35-step staircase truck, passengers on a C-5 may have to climb a steep internal ladder. This **brochure from Air Mobility Command** explains passenger requirements for boarding military aircraft and includes pictures of the staircases used for boarding.

The PE is a regular commercial aircraft and can accommodate passengers with limited mobility. At some locations, including, Seatac, BWI, Norfolk, and Ramstein, passengers

board the PE using a jetway, which is the best option for travelers who have difficulty with stairs.

At most other locations, the PE boards using an outside staircase, which may pose a problem for some passengers. Check with passenger terminals directly to confirm whether they can accommodate specific mobility challenges.

9. Space-A passengers cannot bring pets on the Patriot Express.

Pets are not authorized to fly Space-A on any aircraft unless they are registered service animals.

10. Don't try to fly Space-A on the Patriot Express during PCS season.

PCS season is a bad time to fly Space-A in general, especially to/from OCONUS locations. Getting a seat on a PE is even more difficult at this time, because the PEs are full of families PCSing on orders.

Most passenger terminals that are part of a PE route also have other Space-A flights (i.e., on military cargo planes), so if you are traveling from one of those terminals, you may have multiple options.

One notable exception is Seatac, which does not have any other Space-A flights besides the PE. If you are in the Seattle area during PCS season and want to fly Space-A, it's best to try JB Lewis-McChord or NAS Whidbey Island.

11. When hopping a Patriot Express, the usual Space-A advice applies.

Space-A is never a good option when you need to be somewhere by a certain date, whether for a family event, a cruise departure, or Christmas dinner.

The PE is not an exception. Despite the fact that you can see the schedule in advance, a PE is by no means a sure thing for Space-A travelers, even those in low-numbered categories.

You may know when a flight is scheduled to depart, but you won't know until, at most, 3 days in advance if there are any Space-A seats, and you won't know until the last minute whether you've made the flight.

*** [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. ***

CHAPTER 4



The option to stay in lodging on a military base is an incredible benefit available to members of the military community.

When traveling on leave or as a retiree, remember that you can stay in Department of Defense (DoD) lodging at most U.S. military bases around the world on a space-available basis.

During a 2-month road trip across the U.S., my husband and I spent only three nights in a regular hotel. Other than a few visits with friends, we stayed on military bases all other nights. In every instance, we enjoyed relaxing stays, a good workout, free parking, and in some cases, free breakfast before getting back on the road.

You might be surprised by all the places you can find U.S. military bases, even overseas. While driving from Germany to France, we needed a place to spend the night, so we checked to see whether there were any military bases nearby. Sure enough, Chievres Air Base in Lens, Belgium was right on the way. We enjoyed a little taste of home between stays at our European-style apartments.

Why Choose Military (DOD) Lodging?

Military Space-A lodging is great because it's clean, safe, relatively inexpensive, and you always have access to a good fitness facility. Some of the rooms are quite spacious, often with a kitchen and living room, and many lodges have free laundry facilities. Depending on the location and length of your stay, while you're there you may be able to use other base services, such as the commissary, the BX, the golf course, or recreational equipment rentals.

Space-A Lodging Eligibility

Service members, veterans with a service-connected disability, retirees, and their family members may stay in Space-A lodging on most U.S. military bases around the world. Each branch of service has its own eligibility policy, but in general, Space-A lodging is more flexible than Space-A flying. A service member or retiree's spouse may use the privilege without the sponsor present. Also, eligible patrons can usually sponsor guests, including family members or civilians who do not have a DoD identification card.

Individual bases, particularly overseas, may have their own restrictions, and there is no policy that applies to *all* facilities, even within a branch of service. Call and verify the policy before making your arrangements.

DoD Lodging Room Types

As a reminder for those who haven't stayed on base for a while, here's a refresher on the types of military accommodations.

In some military lodging facilities, a standard room is like a regular hotel room with a king or two queen beds. In other facilities, a standard room is more like a one-bedroom apartment with a kitchen, living room, and pull-out couch. You may also have the option of a room with a shared bathroom.

Depending on the branch of service, each base/post refers to standard rooms as: Visiting Quarters (VQs), Visiting Airman Quarters (VAQs), Visiting Enlisted Quarters (VEQs), or Visiting Officer Quarters (VOQs).

Distinguished Visitor Quarters (DVQs) are for service members who are E9 or O6 and above.

Temporary Lodging Facilities (TLFs) are generally for families and usually have at least two bedrooms plus a full kitchen.

Because retirees and active duty traveling on leave are Space-A, you may get a room that does not match your rank (and you will pay the corresponding rate).

Space-A Lodging Reservation Basics & Tips

Whatever your branch of service, you can stay on any U.S. military base that offers Space-A lodging. Policies vary by location in terms of how far in advance you can reserve a room and for how long. In some places you can reserve up to 30 days in advance, but many lodging facilities don't accept Space-A reservations more than a few days before arrival. We've stayed in several places that would only let us reserve one night at a time.

We have a few tried-and-true strategies when booking Space-A lodging. No matter what the receptionist tells us about availability when we first call to make a reservation, we almost always get a room. Here are a few tips that got us 2 weeks at Naval Amphibious Base Coronado over 4th of July and more than a week at the Hale Koa ([a military resort in Hawaii](#)) on only a couple days' notice:

- **Call the front desk and speak to the staff directly.** Use the facility's local phone number rather than going through the central reservation line or the DOD Lodging website. Select the phone menu option for the front desk, not the option to make a reservation. The receptionist on duty might know of a cancellation or early check-out that is not reflected in the reservation system.
- **Request one night at a time.** Some lodges are reluctant to reserve multiple nights for a Space-A guest, even if it's not officially against their policy. In those cases, we reserve one night at a time. The next morning, we call and ask if we can extend our stay. This strategy rarely fails.
- **Ask the receptionist when you should try again.** If they're full the first time we call, we always ask when we should call back. Each location has its own policies and deadlines. At the Hale Koa, the receptionist told my husband to call at 0700 — not 0659, not 0701 — to inquire about last-minute cancellations. He followed her instructions and we got a room for a few nights, then an extension for another week, right in the middle of Spring Break season.
- **Call after check-in deadlines or check-out times.** If we don't have intel like we had at the Hale Koa, we use our own logic to guess when they might release rooms. Many lodges hold rooms until midnight, at which point the guest is considered a no-show. Calling around 1100 after most guests have checked out is another option.
- **Inquire about a DVQ or TLF.** Even if the rest of the lodge is full, the receptionist may not offer these rooms unless you specifically ask. They often keep a DV room on reserve or limit use of TLFs to families with children, but if you're trying for a last-minute stay, ask if they will release one of those rooms. DVQs and TLFs cost more than regular rooms, but they are usually larger and a good value.
- **Try for a room no matter how unlikely it seems.** On more than one occasion, after hearing from fellow Space-A passengers that on-base lodging was

full, we called and successfully reserved a room. When we landed at Andersen AFB in Guam for an overnight layover before continuing to Hawaii, everyone said Space-A lodging was rarely available. Even the sign next to the phone in the terminal indicated as much. Despite those warnings, my husband called anyway, and while most of our fellow passengers spent the night in the terminal, we stayed at the lodge. Don't take anyone else's word for it; always try for a room.

- **Add your name to the waitlist.** Some military lodging locations, such as a the [New Sanno hotel in Tokyo](#), maintain a waitlist. Add your name to the list if a room is not available the first time you call. There is a good chance the facility will have cancellations or release rooms they were holding in reserve.

Military Lodging by Service

Each branch of service runs its own temporary lodging.

Air Force: [Air Forces Inns](#) runs temporary lodging on most Air Force and Air Reserve bases. They have 89 locations around the world. We've always had great experiences at Air Force Inns, and I especially like the automatic coffee machines they often have in the lobby. Sometimes it's the little things that make you look forward to your stay!

Army: Due to the Privatization of Army Lodging (PAL) program, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) now runs most of the Army's temporary lodging facilities within the continental United States (CONUS). On some bases, IHG uses their own branding, such as Holiday Inn Express or Candlewood Suites. On other bases they've retained the old name, such as the Rainier Inn on JB Lewis-McChord.

When staying at an IHG property, unlike temporary lodging run by other branches of the military, you pay tax on the rate. One benefit of the privatization is that you can accrue and use points as part of IHG's loyalty program. They also offer free breakfast.

[Army Lodging](#) manages two CONUS locations and all locations outside the continental United States (OCONUS). The rate at facilities run by Army Lodging is not taxed.

Marines: [Inns of the Corps](#) manages temporary lodging on Marine Bases. There are more than a dozen locations across the United States and in Hawaii and Japan.

Navy: The Navy has two brands of accommodation: [Navy Gateway Inns & Suites \(NGIS\)](#) and [Navy Lodge](#). Both brands have locations worldwide, and many naval bases have an NGIS and a Navy Lodge. We've stayed at both accommodations many times and found them to be equally good.

Coast Guard: Coast Guard bases tend to be small, and most do not have temporary lodging. In general, those that have it are training bases, but there are several sites that have cottages and RV/camping facilities. The [Coast Guard Lodging](#) website lists all locations by state.

National Guard: Many National Guard locations (mostly training centers) have lodging, but it is managed by the individual sites. Depending on the facility, space-available accommodations range from single rooms with shared bath to Distinguished Visitor Quarters. If you would like to stay at a National Guard base, I recommended searching online by individual location.

Across all branches of service, there are hundreds of locations and well over 50,000 rooms available for Space-A lodging. Whether you want convenience to a passenger terminal, ocean views, or simply an affordable place to stay while traveling, on-base lodging is a great option!

* * * [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

CHAPTER 5



Find the answers to the most common Space-A travel questions here! This chapter addresses the following FAQs:

- I'm new to Space-A flying. How does it work?
- Am I eligible to fly Space-A?
- How do I sign up to fly Space-A?
- What should I bring on a Space-A flight?
- Where can I find Space-A flight schedules?
- What bases have flights to . . . [insert destination]?
- How do I fly Space-A on the Patriot Express (a.k.a. "the rotator")?
- I'm a spouse. Can I fly Space-A without my sponsor?
- Do you have any advice for flying Space-A with children?
- Can I fly Space-A between Europe and Asia?
- How does Space-A lodging work?
- How do Space-A travelers arrange lodging without knowing when they will arrive?
- What facilities can I use on bases overseas?

1. How does Space-A flying work?

Read Chapter 1 of this Guide or the [Quickstart Guide to Space-A Flights](#) to get a detailed overview of the entire Space-A flying process.

2. Am I eligible to fly Space-A?

[Visit the Air Mobility Command website](#) for a list of eligible travelers.

3. How do I sign up to fly Space-A?

You can sign up via e-mail, fax, using the Take-a-Hop app, or through the [Air Mobility Command website's online form](#). You can also sign up in person at the terminal.

Active duty can sign up as soon as they are on leave. Retirees can sign up a maximum of 60 days prior to the date of travel. [Click here for detailed information about retiree signup.](#)

Signup rules for unaccompanied dependents vary by situation and [are explained here.](#)

4. What should I bring on a Space-A flight?

Chapter 2 of this Guide and the [online Space-A Packing List](#) explain what to wear and what to bring on a Space-A flight, including required documentation.

5. Where can I find Space-A flight schedules?

Most military passenger terminals post their Space-A flight schedules on their respective pages on the Air Mobility Command website. You can also obtain flight schedules by calling the terminal directly. Scroll down to the Passenger Terminal Directory on the [Air Mobility Command Travel Page](#) to see a list of all terminals and their contact information, including links to their web pages.

[Click here for detailed instructions](#) on how to find and read Space-A flight schedules.

6. What bases have flights to . . . [insert destination]?

Poppin' Smoke has detailed guides to many of the top Space-A locations. The guides explain what bases have flights to and from the location as well as information about lodging, ground transportation, immigration procedures, and other important topics. [Click here for a list of guides.](#)

7. How do I fly Space-A on the Patriot Express?

The process for flying Space-A on the Patriot Express (PE) is the same as for any other Space-A flight. The main difference is that PE schedules are available for one month at a time, whereas schedules for other Space-A flights are available up to 72 hours in advance.

See Chapter 3 or [click here for more information](#) about flying Space-A on the PE, including a list of all PE routes worldwide.

8. As a spouse, can I fly Space-A without my sponsor?

Spouses of active duty service members who are deployed 30+ days or stationed outside of the continental U.S. (OCONUS) are eligible to fly Space-A. [Click here](#) to determine where you can fly, what paperwork you need, and how to sign up.

9. Do you have any advice for flying Space-A with children?

Yes! Read Chapter 6 or [click here for 12 Tips for Flying Space-A With Kids](#).

10. Can I fly Space-A between Europe and Asia?

Yes, but generally, you must travel via the United States. Missions usually do not fly directly between the Pacific and European theaters of operation.

We flew Space-A from Japan to Germany in March 2019. [Here are our lessons learned](#).

11. How does Space-A lodging work?

Find everything you need to know in Chapter 4 of this Guide or in the online article [Space-A Lodging: Eligibility & Reservation Tips](#).

12. How do Space-A travelers arrange lodging without knowing when they will arrive?

We usually wait until we land to book lodging, and we always find a last-minute room. You can also make a reservation in advance once you are manifested on a flight, but don't forget to guarantee it for late arrival and cancel it if the flight doesn't work out. You should never make any non-refundable reservations based on your expected arrival on a Space-A flight.

[Click here for more information](#) about how to arrange lodging when flying Space-A to Europe.

13. What facilities can I use on bases overseas?

It depends on the country. Base access is subject to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and the host country.

On most U.S. military bases overseas, retirees and active duty who are not stationed in the host country can stay in base lodging and use Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) facilities, such as the fitness center, golf course, and Outdoor Recreation. On bases in Japan and Korea, they also have commissary and Exchange privileges, but throughout Europe, privileges are restricted. The [AAFES website](#) has more detail about who can use the Exchange in each country. Commissary privileges generally follow suit.

* * * [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

BONUS: CHAPTER 6



Flying Space-A with kids? No problem! It's actually easier than flying commercial. If you're new to Space-A flying – or you're planning your first "military hop" with the kiddos – we've got you covered. Here are 12 important things you need to know about how to plan, what to bring, and how to stay sane!

Need-to-Know Preparation

1. Every passenger must have a seat.

All passengers traveling with you – even babies – need a seat. There is no such thing as a "lap child" on a Space-A flight, even if you plan to hold your baby the entire time. When signing up for a flight, include all children in the passenger count.

2. Children of all ages need proper identification.

All passengers age 14 or older need a military ID card. Children younger than 14 who do not have a military ID card must have a federal, state, local, or tribal government-issued ID.

3. You can check car seats.

The Air Mobility Command recommends use of car seats for children under the age of 1, but they are not required. If you don't want to use your child's car seat on the plane, you can check it. Car seats don't count towards your baggage limit (two 70 lb bags per passenger on most flights).

4. You can bring extra infant formula, breast milk, and juice.

Military passenger terminals follow Transportation Security Administration (TSA) guidelines for those liquids. Declare them before going through security screening.

5. All passengers must have appropriate clothing.

Closed shoes are required on all aircraft except for the Patriot Express. That means no sandals or Crocs, even for kids.

Depending on the type of aircraft and where you're sitting, the plane can be extremely cold or very warm. It's more often the former, but dress in layers just in case.

Remember that you will not have access to your checked baggage – even if you can see it on the pallet in front of you – during the flight. Any clothing you may need has to be on your body or in your carry-on bag.

6. The aircraft is not a playground.

If you fly in a cargo plane, such as a C-17, it may have a lot of open space. You might be tempted to let restless kids run around, but it's not a safe place for that type of play. The aircraft has buttons, switches, cables, sharp corners, tie-downs, and military equipment onboard. It's easy for a child to get injured or tamper with something he/she shouldn't be touching.

You can take advantage of the open space by stretching out and letting the kids play in the area near you, but keep in mind that you are hitching a ride with a military mission, and the safety and supervision of your children are your responsibility.

What to Bring

7. Ear protection

Most military aircraft are very noisy, and the flight crew provides foam earplugs for all passengers. These earplugs aren't always comfortable or suitable for small children, so it's better to bring your own ear protection for the kids. **Headphones that connect to an entertainment option** are a good choice, and some kids like earmuffs!

8. Activities and snacks

Between the actual flight and the hours you may spend waiting in the terminal, be prepared for a lot of down time. Make sure you have plenty of movies and books downloaded to your tablet. Portable travel games are also a good idea to keep the kids entertained.

Finally, don't forget about snacks. You can purchase a boxed meal for less than \$10 per person at many passenger terminals, but you won't receive the meals until you're onboard. Don't count on buying food in the terminal; some terminals don't have a snack bar, and those that do often have limited hours.

9. Sleeping gear

Bring blankets or a small sleeping bag for warmth and to help the kids sleep comfortably. Depending on the type of aircraft, passengers may be able to stretch out on the floor. In that case, having a small, easily-inflatable sleeping pad is very helpful.

10. A backpack with wheels

When traveling Space-A with children, you need your hands free to help the kids board the bus and climb the steps to the aircraft. Bring a bag that you can easily roll through the terminal and then put on your back while in transit.

Advice to Keep Your Sanity

11. When traveling without your spouse, partner with another parent.

Traveling by yourself with kids can be very challenging, but sometimes you don't have a choice. If you see other Space-A passengers traveling with kids, ask if they want to pair up. You can help each other by watching luggage while one parent takes a child to the bathroom or nurses, by sharing games and activities, or simply by offering moral support. Having a buddy to navigate the journey with you can make a huge difference.

12. Ask for help.

Space-A travelers are a friendly bunch. If you can't find a travel buddy, don't hesitate to ask other passengers for help. Whether they're retirees or other active duty families, someone will be happy to lend you a hand.

With the right preparation and planning, flying Space-A with kids can be a much better experience than flying commercial. Also, you are avoiding one potential source of stress when flying on military planes: if your baby cries, you don't need to worry about disturbing other passengers, because no one can hear it!

* * * [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

BONUS: CHAPTER 7



You can read every rule and procedure ever published about flying Space-A and still not know how to have a successful journey. Here's where the strategy comes into play. You will learn a lot as you go, but in the meantime, here are a few Space-A flying tips based on what we've learned through years of taking "military hops" around the world.

If you're new to Space-A, read Chapter 1 first to learn the basics.

Give Yourself as Many Options as Possible

Depending on where you live, you may have several possible bases from which you could fly. When we lived in the Washington, DC area and wanted to travel to Europe, we looked for flights from JB Andrews, Dover AFB, Baltimore Washington airport, and Naval Station Norfolk. We also considered JB McGuire-Dix as an option. They have many flights to Europe, and it's fairly easy to fly Space-A from JB Andrews or Dover AFB to McGuire.

If you don't live close to a base with an air terminal that has regular flights to your target destinations, consider how you could easily get to an area of the country (such as DC) with several nearby bases. Or make your way to a base that has frequent Space-A flights,

even if they aren't to the place you want to go. Flights within CONUS tend to be less competitive than overseas flights, so chances are good that you can hop to one of the major hubs.

So how do you know which bases have the most flights to the places you want to go? Or which CONUS bases have the most flights from one to another?

Monitor the Space-A Flight Schedules

I follow dozens of passenger terminals' web pages to become familiar with their flight schedules. Do I look at each terminal's page daily? Of course not. But I review them periodically and as they show up on my feed. When we are planning a trip, I focus on the bases we might fly to and from.

For example, for several weeks before we flew [Space-A from Japan to Europe](#), I monitored the activity at Yokota AB, Kadena AB (Okinawa), Travis AFB, JB Lewis-McChord, JB Elmendorf-Richardson, and JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam. Any of those bases could have been part of our journey, so I watched the schedules to get a sense of how many Space-A seats there were and how many Cat 6's were getting on.

In case you weren't sure where JB Elmendorf-Richardson is, it's in Alaska. That brings me to my next point . . .

Consider Avoiding the Busiest Space-A Locations

Sometimes the busiest air terminal isn't the best option. For example, many Space-A passengers traveling to and from bases in the Pacific try to fly through Hawaii. But [JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam is a major hub](#) and there are *a lot* of people competing for flights. In our experience, active duty spouses traveling with children occupy many of the Space-A seats; unaccompanied spouses are Cat 4 or 5, so if you are in a lower-priority category, it's easy to get stuck.

If you can avoid Hawaii by catching a flight through JB Elmendorf-Richardson, you might not have so much competition for seats.

When flying Space-A, you must be willing to travel out of your way or to a less desirable location to keep moving forward. As an Army buddy advised my husband in his early days of flying Space-A . . .

Take the First Thing Smokin'

In other words, don't wait for the perfect flight. To borrow from an old proverb, a flight departing today is better than two on the schedule for tomorrow.

Let's say you are at [Ramstein AB in Germany](#) trying to return to Dover AFB, where you parked your car. There's a flight to Dover tomorrow evening, but seats are still TBD.

Today there is a flight to Westover Air Reserve Base in Chicopee, Massachusetts with 10 seats available.

You might not know exactly where Chicopee is, but you should try for that flight. Chances are good that you will get a seat, because most of the other Space-A passengers will wait for the Dover flight. But the Dover mission might not have Space-A seats, or it could fall off the schedule entirely. If you fly to Westover, at least you will have made it across the Atlantic and won't face the possibility of getting stuck in Germany or paying for an overseas fare.

Even if you do get a seat on the exact flight you wanted, keep in mind that nothing is certain until you're in the air. . .

Expect Last-Minute Changes

If you're planning to compete for a flight within the next 24 hours, call the terminal regularly for updates to ensure you don't miss a change to Roll Call time.

Other aspects of your planned flight can change without notice: the number of seats available, the Roll Call time, the boarding and departure times, even the baggage weight limit.

Flying Space-A involves a lot of "hurry up and wait." You may rush to get to the terminal in time for Roll Call, only to sit there for 5 hours before boarding.

Sometimes the terminal will announce a significant delay, only to call for boarding 30 minutes later. Other times you may wait in the terminal all day with bags packed only to find out the flight isn't taking off until the next day. The terminal staff may give you an idea of whether it's safe to leave, but often it's your call.

One thing is certain: do not go back to sleep if you wake up and see that an early morning Roll Call has been pushed back. Go to the terminal at the original Roll Call time. My husband and I learned that lesson multiple times.

Finally, the #1 tip when flying Space-A is . . .

Have a Plan B

If you read the first chapter of this book and stories about our experiences, I'm sure you figured out that Flying Space-A is very unpredictable. You should always have a contingency plan.

If you have time and flexibility, you can wait several days for a flight. You could also hop to another base that has more flight options, or you could even spend your vacation at that next base if you still can't get out.

Of course, buying a regular plane ticket is always a possibility, but it can be very expensive, especially at the last minute. I recommend pricing this option as part of your planning so you know how much you would need to cover it.

Learning the basics of Space-A is just the beginning. Once you get out there and start traveling, you will develop your own strategies, and each time you fly Space-A, you will learn something new.

We look forward to meeting you on our next Space-A flight!

* * * [Click here](#) to view the online version of this chapter. * * *

APPENDIX

Section I: Acronyms

AB

Airbase

AFB

Air Force Base

AMC

Air Mobility Command

CONUS

Continental United States

DAV

Disabled American Veteran

DOD

Department of Defense

DODI

Department of Defense Instruction

DV

Distinguished Visitor

EML

Environmental and Morale Leave

IHG

InterContinental Hotel Group

JB

Joint Base

JTR

Joint Travel Regulation

KMC

Kaiserslautern Military Community

MAC

Military Airlift Command

MCAS

Marine Corps Air Station

MWR

Morale, Welfare and Recreation

NAS

Naval Air Station

NAVSTA

Naval Station

NGIS

Navy Gateway Inns and Suites

OCONUS

Outside Continental United States

PAL

Privatization of Army Lodging

PCS

Permanent Change of Station

PE

Patriot Express

SOFA

Status of Forces Agreement

TBD

To be determined

TSA

Transportation Security Administration

USO

United Services Organization

VRC

Virtual Roll Call

Section II: Space-A Terminology

Category or “Cat”: Priority for Space-A seats is based on a priority system organized by category. There are six categories, and Cat 1 is the highest. Priority within a category is based on your signup date and time.

Competing: When you mark yourself present for a flight, you are “competing” with other Space-A passengers for seats.

CONUS: The Continental United States. It includes only the lower 48 states.

Mac Flying: Another way of referring to flying Space-A. It comes from the acronym for Military Airlift Command.

Manifested: If you are “manifested” on a flight, it means you are checked in and have your boarding pass.

Marking Yourself Present: The process of going to the passenger terminal to let them know you are competing for a scheduled flight. You can mark yourself present up to 24 hours before a flight. You must be marked present before Roll Call begins.

Mission: Another name for flights scheduled between bases. The mission is the priority, and Space-A passengers are along for the ride. Keep in mind that missions can be delayed, canceled, or changed at any moment.

OCONUS: Outside the Continental United States. OCONUS destinations include any foreign country, Alaska, Hawaii, and other U.S. territories.

Organic Aircraft: Military aircraft, such as a C-5, C-17, or KC-135. On many organic aircraft, there is webbed seating along the sides, meaning passengers face the center. You could be sitting in front of a tank, medical supplies, or any other type of military equipment. Some of these aircraft can be configured with regular seats, while in others you may be able to lie on the floor if there is open space.

Patriot Express: Also known as the “rotator.” This is a charter plane whose primary purpose is to transport duty passengers between bases. Extra seats may be used by Space-A passengers.

Roll Call: The time at which the passenger terminal staff call the names of Space-A travelers who have been selected for a given flight. You must be at the terminal, bags packed, at the time of Roll Call.

Signup: Signup involves notifying every passenger terminal from which you might want to fly Space-A to establish your place in the virtual queue. You can sign up in person at the terminal, via e-mail or fax, or using the Take-a-Hop app.

Space-A: Space Available. Military missions sometimes have extra seats after all equipment and space required passengers have been accommodated. Members of the military community may have access to these seats on a space-available basis. Remember, Space-A is a privilege, not an entitlement, and the military mission always comes first!

Take a Hop: Yet another term that refers to flying Space-A, e.g., “I took a hop from Dover Air Force Base to Ramstein, Germany.”

Virtual Roll Call: Also known as VRC, a VRC is when you do not (officially) have to be present at the terminal during Roll Call. The passenger terminal staff e-mail you to let you know you have been selected for the flight. You must respond promptly to confirm receipt of the message.

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