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FEATURED

Air Guard pilot returns to Sioux Center

Eric Sandbulte esandbulte@nwestiowa.com

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Justean, Olivia, William, Andrew and Charlotte pose together shortly after Andrew's return from two months of deployment overseas. Upon returning from his trips with the Iowa Air National Guard, he prioritizes spending time with his family.

SIOUX CENTER—It's good to be home.

That's the sentiment from Andrew Ter Haar following about two months of deployment in Qatar, flying refueling missions to support aircraft in the region.

The 30-year-old Sioux Center native has made aviation his career and has been flying KC-135 Stratotankers since 2018.

As a captain with the 185th Air Refueling Wing in the Iowa Air National Guard out of Sioux City, his deployment as part of Operation Inherent Resolve began in the middle of April, flying about every other day. He returned June 26.

"Back home, we fly maybe once a week for the Guard. But when you're deployed, you're flying every other day at least, if not more. You're flying a ton and it's great. You get proficient and build confidence and really get to know the aircraft that you're flying," Ter Haar said. "I try to spend at least 30 minutes to an hour every flight reading our operations manual, essentially, taking out key little pieces about how the plane flies or how you're supposed to be operating it."

This also marked his first deployment as an aircraft commander, where he was responsible for his plane's mission and decision-making on the craft.

"They say the flying is the easy part. It's the decision-making when things go wrong is when you earn your paycheck," he said.

While in Qatar, he and others were able to go see some of the local sights.

"It's one of the richest countries in the world," Ter Haar said. "You go downtown and you almost forget you're deployed in the Middle East to go into combat zones. You feel a bit like a tourist."



Mike Perez, Andrew Ter Haar and Ashley Patten hold up the U.S. flag in front of the KC-135 Stratotanker they fly to refuel other aircraft while in the air. Ter Haar has flown these since 2018.

There are feelings of guilt when visiting the local market and he thinks of his wife, Justean, back home taking care of their three children — William, 6; Charlotte, 3; Olivia, 1. While the flying and the traveling are the most enjoyable part of his work with the Iowa Air National Guard, leaving his family is also the hardest part.

“I tell my wife she has the harder job, staying home with the three kids. I come home and I’m trying to watch three kids by myself while she’s out doing errands or something, I can only last about two or three hours before I lose my mind,” he said. “I’m a bit more comfortable in an airplane than I am changing diapers and trying to feed three kids. That’s me, personally.”

Now home, Ter Haar is trying to get in as much family time as he can. The kids want to go camping, so he’s looking into their options for this summer. He and his son have been getting practice in sleeping in a tent last week.

“He’s going to remember that a lot more than I would remember getting a good night of sleep,” Ter Haar said. “You try to make memories when you can while you’re home, either before you go or when you get back. ... The time you’re home, you want to make it count by spending time with family so they remember that instead of remembering you being gone all the time.”

Getting to fly as part of his career has allowed him to see many beautiful parts of the world, whether it’s a flight to the U.K. or Norway. It has let him see creation from an incredible point of view. And while it’s hard to compete with the beauty of Hawaii, he said there is a striking beauty to Alaska and northern Canada.

“It’s kind of humbling and makes you feel small when you’re over those places, or even when flying above the ocean. In five hours, we’re not going to see any kind of land or another person,” Ter Haar said. “You get a new kind of respect for people crossing the ocean in boats 100 years ago. We’re only going to be flying for five hours, but those guys were on a boat for a month or two.”

Another beautiful and humbling place he’s flown over is Afghanistan.

“It’s a very mountainous country, where you’re flying around at 25,000 feet and there are mountain peaks that are higher than you within a few hundred miles. It makes you feel small,” he said. “You look outside and there are times where if I didn’t know any better, I’d say we’re over Utah or something.”

Like father, like son

Ter Haar was exposed to flying from an early age through his father, Tim, who piloted small passenger planes for AirFlair.

But it wasn’t until after graduation from Unity Christian High School in Orange City in 2010 that Ter Haar took the next step by signing up for the Iowa Air National Guard.

“I always wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself, join something that’s meaningful and has purpose,” he said. “That’s what I was going for. Also, the college benefits were really nice.”

Ter Haar credits his older brothers and his wife’s brothers for this decision, as they were all in the military in some capacity.

“Seeing them and talking with them about their experiences, it was a good way to learn a skill or two and make a little money and get some good benefits for college,” he said.

When he joined in 2010, he began in their civil engineering shop, working on generators and arresting cables. That was his role there for six years.

In the meantime, he began to pursue his private pilot's license around 2012-13 at the Sioux Center Municipal Airport. It took about six months of work to get that, all while attending Dordt College in Sioux Center. He graduated in 2015 with a degree in construction management.

He began officer training school in the spring of 2016 and went on to pilot training for about 13 months.

He started off with a small, single-engine, two-seat airplane, the T-6. After that, he moved on to an eight-seat business jet, the T-1, where he could work alongside a second pilot.

“That’s how you learn to fly as a crew, flying with another person up there. You both have a checklist and keep each other accountable,” Ter Haar said. “Do that for about the final six months of the 13, and they give you your wings.”

It was after that he traveled to Oklahoma to learn how to fly the KC-135.

In addition to his job with the Guard, he’s been a pilot for AirFlair since June 2020. As he continues his work with the Guard and civilian pilot work, he isn’t certain what the future will hold for his career as he balances his aviation work and his family life.

As he put it, “It’s all kind of up in the air.”



Andrew Ter Haar hugs two of his children, William and Charlotte, after returning to the U.S. from deployment to Qatar. His family met him at Lincoln, NE, on June 26, after he spent about two months overseas with his Iowa Air National Guard unit.

The KC-135 Stratotanker:

The KC-135 Stratotanker that Andrew Ter Haar flies is primarily used to refuel other aircraft while still in the air, either letting those aircraft stay up longer to monitor a target, provide longer coverage for allies or fly farther than they otherwise would.

The tanker is able to refuel a wide variety of aircraft, from fighters such as F-16s or larger transport craft such as C-17s.

“We’ve refueled Boeing 747s. The size of airplanes we refuel go from two or three times our size to 10 times as small,” Ter Haar said.

Tankers are also useful for transporting as many as 50 passengers or additional cargo.

Given the larger scale of those tankers, Ter Haar compared flying them to driving a school bus.

“They all fly the same way, but the controls are a lot slower. It’s heavy. It’s not near as maneuverable. You have to plan ahead a bit more. Like a bus or a semi, you’re really good at going fast down the highway, but if you want to stop, slow down or turn, that takes more,” Ter Haar said. “It’s just a lot bigger and the controls are a lot slower, but it flies a lot faster. You’re doing 500 mph versus 100 mph.”

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Eric Sandbulte