

As our van drove through the gate of the 31st Air Base in Poland, it occurred to me how unremarkable it had become interacting with our former Warsaw Pact foes.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we rushed eastward and marveled how extraordinary it was to set foot in such unlikely places as Poland or

Czechoslovakia.

Over the last decade, however, through numerous cultural and military exchange programs, the newness has gradually worn off, much like how the excitement of a new car transforms from a hot topic of discussion to a mere means of conveyance.

But if the novelty of seeing a MiG-21 parked on a ramp has subsided, the fascination of watching the interaction of airmen from two such distinct cultures remains. A group of U.S. airmen traveled to Poland in July to help that nation prepare for the arrival of 48 F-16 Fighting Falcons it purchased from the United States.

Subject matter experts from each nation paired off to compare notes in areas such as maintenance, fire prevention and weapons storage. While there, I realized there was

something else taking place that had become so commonplace in our Air Force that it's probably taken for granted by most. Air Force enlisted people are entrusted with an enormous amount of responsibility.

When the Air Force put together a team representing the essential ingredients to help make the F-16 mission happen in Poland, it drew

heavily upon the enlisted side of the house. That wasn't so with Poland. The technical ser-

geant or master sergeant didn't swap notes with a fellow enlisted member from the Polish air force. Instead, the counterpart was more likely to be a captain or warrant officer.

It's admirable and impressive that these enlisted people hold such positions of authority compared not only with former Eastern European militaries, but with counterparts in our own sister services.

As a young staff sergeant, I deployed to Hungary in 1995 at the beginning of Operation Joint

Endeavor. I still retain not-so-fond memories of dealing with my Army counterpart. The former artillery officer, a captain, didn't understand or appreciate having to deal one-on-one with a lowly staff sergeant.

He was forced to do so because the Air Force places full confidence in the ability of its enlisted force, even though I experienced several moments of self-doubt during this, my first, real-world deployment. But the opportunity to fail or excel was the single biggest influence on my career. I know countless others have shared and benefited from similar opportunities.

When I meet enlisted members such as flight engineers, computer specialists or medical practitioners with skills and expertise coveted in the civilian world, I sometimes can't help wondering why they aren't on the outside making a lot more money doing the same thing.

But could it ever really be the same on the outside? As a member of the Poland site survey team, Senior Master Sgt. Steve Aguilar was entrusted to help his NATO partner make a huge technologi-

cal leap forward as it transformed from the MiG-21 fighter from the Cold War era to a modern version of the F-16. And when the wheels touched down at home station, he felt a sense of mission accomplishment most people never experience.

"I'm glad to be a part of it," Aguilar said.

We're lucky others feel the same way.

— Master Sgt.  
Chuck Roberts

## Taking the extraordinary for granted

by Master Sgt. Keith Reed



**Senior Master Sgt. Tom Vandervort, an Air National Guardsman from the 162nd Fighter Wing in Tucson, Ariz., reviews support equipment with a Polish chief warrant officer during a trip to Poland. Vandervort spent two weeks helping Polish airmen prepare for the arrival of 48 F-16 Fighting Falcons purchased from the United States.**