Exercise "Cowboy"

More than 100 Starfighter, which was almost one tenth of the overall German fleet, were stationed at Luke AFB, Arizona at the end of the nineteen-sixties. It had to be evaluated if a ferry of the aircraft in times of tension was possible from the United States to Germany without major problems. Preparations for exercise "Cowboy" started after an appropriate order had been given by the Chief of the Air Staff. A long range navigation flight from Germany to Luke AFB and back was planned for the period of 1st September until 11th September 1969.

24+23 RF-104G AG 51 ready at Jever AB for exercise Cowboy © Wilhelm Göbel

In addition, the Air Force regarded the whole operation as a good will tour to further enhance the good relationship and co-operation between friendly Air Forces and nations. It was decided to operate with a group of six RF-104G`s supported by engineering staff and escorted by two transport aircraft: a C-160 Transall and a Breguet Atlantic would either fly ahead or follow the F-104 formation. The internal fuel tanks of the RF-104G`s had a higher fuel capacity of 700 lbs compared with the standard F-104, which gave an extended range.

24+12 RF-104G AG 51 Operation Cowboy Jever 1969 © Peter Mühlböck

The officer in command of the exercise was the Kommodore of Jagdbombergeschwader 33, Oberst Kurt Stöcker. The following additional F-104 pilots were assigned to fly with him: Major Josef Herbst of Waffenschule 10, Major Reinhard Rokoss of Jagdbombergeschwader 36, Hauptmann Jürgen Berger of Jagdbombergeschwader 31 "Boelcke", Hauptmann Siegfried Schöllhorn of Jagdbombergeschwader 32 and Hauptmann Klaus Richard of Jagdbombergeschwader 34.

24+23 RF-104G Operation Cowboy 1969 © Luftwaffe

After intensive briefings about navigation, routing, weather conditions and Search and Rescue operations the Commanding Officer of the German Tactical Air Command, Generalmajor Diether Hrabak, said goodbye to the formation on September 1st. Three two-ship flights took off with ten minutes intervals. After a refueling stop at Lossiemouth, Scotland the first night stop was made at Keflavik, Iceland. On September 2nd the aircraft continued to Goose Bay, Canada via Sonderstroem, Greenland.

24+23 RF-104G Operation Cowboy 1969 © Luftwaffe

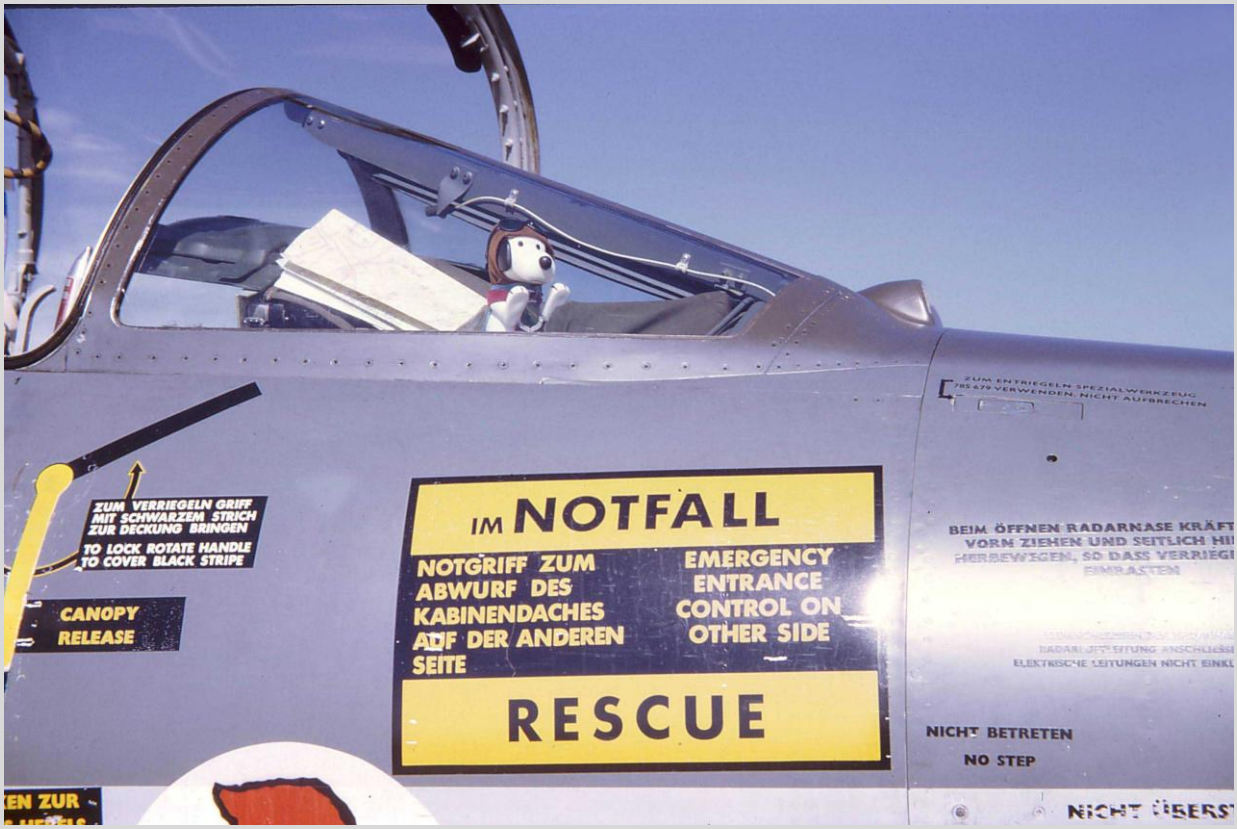
On the next day (September 3rd) United States airspace was entered. Following an intermediate stop at Selfridge AFB, Michigan after a flight of approximately 1,300 nautical miles from Goose Bay the final destination of the day was McConnell AFB, Kansas. The team was welcomed on American soil enthusiastically by the McConnell host unit.

24+04 RF-104G AG 51 Operation Cowboy Luke 1969 © Bob Clarke

The formation finally arrived at Luke AFB, Arizona on September 4th. They received a warm welcome by the American hosts, the Commander of the German Training Command in the United States, Brigadegeneral Hans Heise, and the German Training Squadron at Luke AFB.

RF-104G 24+35 WaSLw 10 Luke 1969 ©_Bob Clarke

RF-104G 24+35 WaSLw 10 Luke 1969 ©_Bob Clarke



RF-104G 24+12 AG 51 “Snoopy” September 1969 © Bob Clarke

RF-104G 23+93 AG 51 Luke September 1969 © Bob Clarke

24+78 RF-104G AG 52 Operation Cowboy Luke 1969 © Luftwaffe

After three days filled with social events and relaxation the flights back to Germany followed the same route. The whole contingent arrived back at Jever Air Base during the afternoon of 11th September. The Chief of the Air Staff, Generalleutnant Johannes Steinhoff, welcomed the returning pilots and supporting soldiers.

Empfang in Jever, v.l. General Steinhoff, Oberst Stöcker, General Hrabak, die Majore Herbst u. Major Rokoss, die Hauptleute Berger, Schoellhorn und Richard. Foto: JaboG 38

© JaboG 38

The operation had been an overall success to an unexpected degree as the six RF-104G had flown during the whole long range navigation exercise without major difficulties or problems.
The exercise proved that a quick and safe return of the Luke Starfighter to Germany by ferry flights was possible if the need should arise.

Starfighter used: 24+04, 24+12, 24+23 (lead), 24+35, 24+78, 23+93.

References:
German Starfighters, Klaus Kropf 2002, Midlands Countries Publications.

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