

Riding the Planes

Sky Marshals redefined airline security in the 1970s

Datelined September 11th and a somber U.S. president outlines the nation's reaction to a string of airline hijackings. The year is not 2001, but 1970. And the president is Richard Nixon, whose foreshadowing 9/11 statement to the nation opened an important chapter in the development of the air marshal service and of interdepartmental cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Within 24 hours of the president's statement, federal agents were traveling on commercial flights to prevent on-flight air piracy and working at airports as a deterrent to would-be hijackers. Within three months, a new sky marshal program was operational.

President Nixon was responding to a series of organized skyjackings that occurred on Sunday, Sept. 6, 1970. Within a four hour period, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine or PFLP took control of three New York-bound planes from European cities: A TWA flight from Frankfurt, a Swissair DC 8 from Zurich and a Pan Am flight during a scheduled stop at Amsterdam. Another attempt to hijack an El Al flight was prevented in flight. A passenger thwarted PFLP member Leila Khaled, who was armed with a grenade, from entering the flight deck, and a crew member wrestled a gun away from the other hijacker, who was killed from a gunshot as part of the struggle.

The hijacked Pan Am jet was flown to a Cairo airport on the morning of Sept. 7 and blown up after the passengers disembarked. The other two planes were held at Dawson's Field, a former British airfield in Jordan, and on Sept. 9, were joined by a hijacked British Airways flight from Bombay. By Sept. 11, most passengers had been released and the hijackers blew up the planes. Finally, on Oct. 1, 1970, the remaining passengers were freed in exchange for the release of Khaled.

By early October, the nation had already implemented the first phase of the president's plan for sky marshals. The Treasury Department assigned approximately 300 agents to air security, about one-third of

★ Steve Rusted was part of a team of three that flew on Pan Am flights. Shown here in his Customs uniform which was worn during preflight screening, he flew in plain clothes and kept his identity secret while on flight duty.



★ Customs security officer patch was part of the uniform of sky marshals.



★ The first identification card issued by the Division of Air Security was honorary and was given to Stuart Seidel, an attorney for the Customs Service.



★ Badge carried by sky marshals.

★ Sky marshals attended a specialized training school before deployment on commercial flights. Courses included statutory materials on air crimes in addition to the basics on thwarting would-be hijackers.



whom came from the former U.S. Customs Service as an interim measure. They joined personnel from the FBI, U.S. Marshals, Defense Department and CIA.

The second phase was outlined on Oct. 28 in an agreement signed by the Treasury and Transportation secretaries creating an air security force in the Customs Service. The agreement initially covered two years, but was extended until June 30, 1974.

Leading air security for Transportation was retired Gen. Benjamin Davis, Jr. A graduate of West Point, Davis began his military career during the era of segregation and played a major role in bringing about the integration of the armed services. He became the first African-American general of the Air Force and moved to the Transportation Department upon his retirement from military service in 1970. A year later, Gen. Davis was elevated to assistant secretary of Transportation with responsibilities for passenger and cargo security.

On November 20, 1970, U.S. Customs Commissioner Myles J. Ambrose announced the appointment of Michael J. McDonnell to head the new air security program. A veteran investigator, McDonnell had served as an intelligence analyst in psychological warfare for the U.S. Army during the 1950s. McDonnell was also among the first agents assigned as interim air marshals aboard international flights.

McDonnell supervised the recruitment, screening, training and deployment of almost 2,000 air security officers to fly on commercial airlines and conduct pre-departure inspections. Recruitment employed all possible outlets and was covered by the major news media. The Miami Herald outlined the requirements for applicants in an article titled, "Sky Marshal to have gun, will travel" on Nov. 3, 1970. Three days later the U.S. Civil Service Commission notified individuals with established eligibility of the sky marshal openings with a request that they also call it "to the attention of others who may meet the requirements." The positions were at the GS-5 grade with an annual salary of \$6,548 or a GS-7 with a salary of \$8,098. Supplemental rates were established for those in the New York City-Newark, N.J., area.

The first class of recruits began its training on Nov. 30 and graduated on Dec. 23. By summer of 1971, the 16th class of trainees graduated and included the first women. Assistant Treasury Secretary Eugene Rossides explained that "From now on we double the number of people the skyjacker must fear. Until today they were only concerned that a trained Treasury sky marshal might be among the men accompanying them on flights. Starting today, they must add to their fears the knowledge that there may be sky marshals among the women as passengers."

Once the marshals were trained, they were deployed immediately, and their schedules were hectic. This is reflected in a contemporary newspaper article titled, "The 1,440-Hour Day of a Skymarshals." Chronicling one agent's traveling schedule in a month, the Sunday News reported that he had visited Madrid, Tel Aviv, Athens and Zurich and "logged 100,000 air miles to do it." (The agent was not identified or photographed to maintain anonymity.)

Former Sky Marshal Stephen G. Rusted attested to the frenetic pace. Rusted was in the 11th class of the Air Security School, which graduated on March 5, 1971. Once deployed, he flew Pan Am out of New York and San Francisco on 747 or 707 jets. On the larger 747s, he was one of three marshals assigned to the flight; on 707s, one of two. A typical route originated in San Francisco with a stop in Tokyo with a final destination of Hong Kong, sometimes with only seven hours on the ground before flying back to San Francisco.

Because of the national publicity on the deployment of Customs air security officers, passengers often looked for marshals on the flight. Rusted and the other marshals were instructed not to reveal their role as sky marshal. According to Rusted, the public had an easy time identifying one of the sky marshal team because a national television newscast announced 7B as the seat number where sky marshals usually sat. (This seat was chosen for strategic reasons.) But the officers used this "leak" to improve surveillance since passengers focused on the marshal in the identified seat, thus allowing the other assigned marshals to go unnoticed.

In-flight surveillance was short lived for the Customs air security officers. On Dec. 5, 1972, Transportation Assistant Secretary Davis announced a change in emphasis for the program. According to Davis, "... the best place to prevent a hijacking is on the ground before the plane goes into the air. That is why the force of about 1,500 sky marshals recruited to ride the planes is now employed primarily on security functions at our principal airports."

The involvement of the Customs Service in the air marshal program continued for a year and half longer. In early 1974, a press release announced the "Air Security Program is winding down..." James Murphy of the Federal Aviation Administration notified the Customs Service of the "complete phaseout of Customs security officers from flight duty."

U.S. Customs Services' responsibility for predeparture examination duty was discontinued on June 25, 1974. Commenting on the conclusion of the Customs Air Security program, Commissioner Vernon D. Acree summed up the accomplishments of the program. Across the life of the program, agents "... made 3,828 arrests, some in-flight; seized or detained 69,317 potentially lethal weapons; and made 248 hard narcotic seizures and 1,667 marijuana and dangerous drug seizures."

The men and women who served as Customs air security officers during the phaseout were reassigned or secured other government positions. Within the Customs Service, 672 became Customs patrol officers, 155 became special agents, 230 were appointed as Customs inspectors and 11 were selected as import specialists.

This only marked the closing of a chapter for sky marshals. Today they are known as federal air marshals and serve the nation in the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), a component of the Department of Homeland Security. There is also a familial link between these chapters in the ongoing history of air marshals. TSA Deputy Administrator Gale Rossides is the daughter of former Assistant Treasury Secretary Eugene Rossides, who oversaw the establishment of the Customs sky marshal program during the 1970s. ■

—David D. McKinney, Ph.D.
CBP Chief Historian