

## Elwood “Pete” Quesada: The Right Man for the Right Job



On November 1, 1958, retired Air Force General Elwood R. Quesada became the first Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) Administrator. President Dwight D. Eisenhower created the new agency when he signed the Federal Aviation Act on August 23, 1958. Although FAA technically came into existence with the passage of the act, the new agency actually assumed its functions in stages. Under the provisions of the act, FAA would begin operations 60 days after the appointment of the first FAA Administrator. Hence, on December 31, Quesada’s new agency began operations.

Born in 1904 in Washington, DC, “Pete” Quesada was the son of a Spanish businessman and an Irish-American mother, and attended Maryland and Georgetown universities. He joined the Army in 1924, received his pilot’s wings, and returned to civilian life before reentering active duty in 1927. Quesada was a member of the flight crew of the Army C-2 Question Mark, which, under the command of Major Carl Spaatz, broke world endurance marks in January 1929 by remaining in the air for more than 150 hours. During World War II, he flew many combat missions and held a series of important commands, including the 12th Fighter Command, the 9th Fighter Command, and the 9th Tactical Air Command. His assignments after the war included: Commanding General, Tactical Air Command (1946); chairman of the Joint Technical Planning Committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1949); and Commanding General of Joint Task Force Three (1951). He held, with various other awards, the Distinguished Service Medal with one cluster and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

After retiring from the Air Force in 1951, with the rank of Lieutenant General, Quesada held a variety of positions in private industry before returning to government as special assistant for aviation matters under President Eisenhower. The President later appointed him chairman of the Airways Modernization Board. Quesada was known to friends and foes as devoted to aviation, a no nonsense manager, and someone willing to make the hard decisions necessary to ensure the safety of the aviation community. In fact, *Life* magazine described him as a “rare bird: a military man with a lively and uncluttered mind, an extrovert capable of surprising introspection, a hot-tempered, driven, and ambitious bureaucrat with a deep sense of public duty and a bullfighter’s sense of private reputation.”

Upon becoming administrator, Quesada worked quickly to organize the FAA. Agency Order 1 established FAA’s basic organizational structure. Assistant administrators for management services, personnel and training, and plans and requirements reported to the administrator, as did the general counsel, the civil air surgeon, and the heads of the offices of public affairs, congressional liaison, and international coordination. Four bureau directors ran the agency’s major programs: research and development; flight standards; air traffic management; and facilities. FAA’s initial field structure included six numbered regions and three field facilities: the National Aviation Facilities Experimental Center in NJ; the Aeronautical Center in OK; and Washington National Airport.

With the organizational structure in place, Quesada mounted a vigorous campaign to improve aviation safety. The fledgling agency faced an enormous task in updating decades-old safety standards that covered flight operations, maintenance procedures, and physical and proficiency requirements for pilots. In one of his more controversial moves, Quesada instituted FAA’s “age 60 rule,” which barred individuals who had reached their 60th birthday from serving as pilots on aircraft engaged in certified route air carrier operations or on large aircraft engaged in supplemental air carrier operations. FAA

declared that a progressive deterioration of certain physiological functions normally occurred with age and that sudden incapacity due to certain medical defects such as heart attack and strokes became significantly more frequent in any group reaching age 60. Implemented, in part, at the urging of the American Airlines president, the rule infuriated pilots and resulted in a storm of complaints from the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). As longtime commercial pilot Captain John Deakin probably spoke for the majority of pilots when he told a reporter, “I hope this moron [Quesada] has a special hot place reserved for him,” because of his “unfair, arbitrary, and illogical rule that has now clipped the wings of thousands of fine young 60-year-olds.”



When Quesada insisted that FAA inspectors fly in the jump seat of the jetliners to observe the pilot, ALPA reacted quickly. During the summer of 1960, a mysterious wave of illness spread throughout the pilot community. This sickness forced Eastern Air Lines to cancel 90 percent of its flights during a one week period. Pilots of other airlines also contracted the illness. In fact, when 102 Pan American pilots called in sick, the reserve crews called in to replace them also refused to fly claiming that had recently had a drink and by FAA rules could not legally fly for 24 hours. ALPA hoped its actions would result in public demand for Quesada’s removal as administrator.

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For the most part, the public backed Quesada. Under his leadership, because of increased inspections of pilot qualifications and airline maintenance practices, flying was becoming safer. As he explained his safety program to *Time*, Quesada said that when a passenger buys a ticket for a flight they “don’t know who’s going to fly” them or anything about the pilot’s training or the airline’s equipment. “The public acts in faith, faith in the system, and we’ll see to backing up that faith. I’m here to represent the public, and dammit, the public will be protected.”



In addition to his safety campaign, Quesada worked to modernize air traffic control systems. During his tenure, the FAA commissioned the first UNIVAC file computers for air traffic control use at the air route traffic control centers. Controllers used these computers to prepare flight progress strips, exchange information with one another, and aid them in their routine “bookkeeping chores.” To aid in the control of civil and military air traffic, he also put into operation in the New York area a 64-code air traffic control radar beacon system that became known as secondary radar. A descendant of the World War II IFF (identification, friend, or foe), the new equipment reinforced primary radar signals and permitted positive identification of individual aircraft carrying transponders. He adopted the ASDE radar system, originally developed for the Air Force, to provide air traffic controllers with information on the position of aircraft and other vehicles on the ground, even during darkness and fog. In addition, the FAA awarded the MITRE Corporation, a research institution recently created by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Lincoln Laboratories, a contract totaling nearly \$6 million for advanced experimentation on automated air traffic control.

Quesada also placed in effect the first of a series of regulations designed to minimize aircraft noise at major airports. Special Civil Air Regulation 438 set up rules for both civil and military aircraft operating at Los Angeles International Airport that included minimum altitudes, preferential runways, and approach and departure routes over the least populated areas. He subsequently issued similar special regulations for operations at New York International and at Washington National Airport.

Nearing the end of his tenure, in December 1960, Quesada faced a major challenge when a United DC-8 and a TWA Super Constellation collided in midair over Brooklyn, NY. All 128 occupants aboard the planes and eight persons on the ground were killed. Civil Aeronautics Board investigators determined that the United flight had proceeded beyond its clearance limit and the airspace assigned to it by air traffic control. The DC-8's high speed, coupled with a change of clearance that reduced the distance the aircraft needed to travel by approximately 11 miles, contributed to the crash. CAB concluded that the crew did not take note of the change of time and distance associated with the new clearance. Although the plane's inoperative VHF radio increased the crew's workload, the pilot did not report the malfunction to controllers. As a result of this accident, Quesada quickly moved to require that pilots operating under instrument flight rules to report malfunctions of their navigation or communications equipment. He also announced a program to equip all turbine-powered aircraft with distance measuring equipment. A new speed rule prohibited civil aircraft from exceeding 250 knots when they were within 30 nautical miles of a destination airport and flying below 10,000 feet.

When John F. Kennedy became the 35th president of the United States on January 20, 1961, Elwood Quesada resigned from the agency he helped to create. As he left office, the 40,000 employees of Quesada's two-year-old agency were operating and maintaining 9,500 air navigation and traffic control facilities, including 425 flight service stations, 228 airport traffic control towers, 41 long-range and 21 precision approach radars, 53 airport surveillance radars, and 35 air route traffic control centers. By 1961 U.S. scheduled air carriers were transporting 60 million passengers a year. A number of new and larger airports were opened or under construction to accommodate increasing jet traffic. The integration of civil and military airspace needs was well along. And, the space age had begun – ushering in new technologies ready for adoption by the aviation community.

After leaving the FAA, Quesada became owner of the expansion Washington Senators in 1961. He sold his stake in the team in 1963. He later became President and Chief Executive Officer of the L'Enfant Plaza Corporation, a private corporation which successfully partnered with the federal government to develop L'Enfant Plaza. He also served as a member of the Temporary Commission on Pennsylvania Avenue, a precursor of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, established to redevelop Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the United States Capitol. He died in Washington, DC, in 1993.