

By Maria Papageorgiou



NO ORDINARY JOE

AVIATION SAFETY 101. Joe Pontecorvo (second from right) is shown attending his FAA INDOC training at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City, Okla. The training lasted for five weeks, with no breaks. In 1959, ties and jackets were de rigueur for FAA's male workforce, even when attending class. (All photos courtesy of Joe Pontecorvo)

Even now, at the grand age of 84, Joe Pontecorvo leaves less vigorous mortals in the dust. One can only imagine what a dynamo he was during his heyday at the FAA. Through a lucky connection with FAA historian Dr. Theresa Kraus, we learned of this vital early staff member of the Washington Flight Standards District Office (FSDO). As the earliest ASI at the FSDO (that we know of), Joe promised to be a motherlode of information about the Washington FSDO of yesterday.

With his weekly ski trips, investment club, and multiple volunteer gigs, it was a challenge getting Joe to find a chunk of time for an interview, but he finally sat down at his kitchen table on March 3, 2010, for a three-way telecom with Dr. Kraus and me. Fortified with documents from his days at FAA, he covered much of his truly spectacular, successful, and exciting 31-year career with the agency – an adventure that started for Joe at the Washington FSDO a little more than half a century ago.

Born in 1926 in City Island, N.Y. (a section of the Bronx), Joe was a bright kid with a curious nature. Despite his intellec-

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tual gifts, college was out because of the modest income of his cab driver father. With a keen interest in airplanes and flying, after high school Joe and a close chum enlisted as Aviation Cadets with the Army Air Corps, the precursor of the Air Force. Because he was only 17, Joe wasn't called up right away. So he bided his time taking CAA-approved engine mechanics training at Roosevelt Aviation School on Long Island. When the Air Corps finally accepted Joe, they didn't offer him aviation school since World War II was winding down. The rich flying experience he does have was gained on his own. (Joe holds, or has held, a commercial certificate with multi-engine land and single-engine land and sea as well as a hot air balloon rating.)

Following his military service, Joe worked for several DC-3 operators – principally Rainbow Airlines at Newark Airport – and later at National Airlines at Idlewild Airport (now JFK International Airport), where he was hired as a mechanic and then moved up the ladder to supervisor. “But,” he says, “I was tired of working the night shift and climbing around airplanes and engines. I wanted to do something more with my life since I was still in my 30s.”

The logical answer for this lover of aviation was FAA. On July 6, 1959, Joe was hired as an Air Carrier Maintenance

Joe's business card from his Washington FSDO days hints at simpler times. Note the one-digit postal zone in the address and the telephone numbers, which had letter exchanges and very few digits.





OPERATION SLINGSHOT was the code name for the Peace Officers program. The air marshals participated in annual refresher courses held at the Border Patrol Academy in Port Isabel, Texas. Joe is pictured here (front row, left) at the course's sixth session in 1968.

Inspector (GS-11) assigned to Capital Airlines at the Washington FSDO (EA-37 then). The FSDO was located in the Public Roads Building, which sat on the hill above Hangar Six at Washington National Airport. The building had “two or three laboratories where they analyzed core materials drilled out of roads. I liked going over to the labs and talking to those guys [about the work they were doing].” Joe’s inquisitive mind always connected easily with investigative tasks. This inclination served him well when he worked accident investigations. “I loved my job,” he enthuses. “I loved working with the airline people, on schedules, and on the op specs. But I liked accident investigation the most.

“The Office Chief, as managers were called during my time at the FSDO, was Gordon Becker,” Joe relates. “I was assigned to Capital Airlines. Slim Kreibold was the PMI. When Slim left, I became the PMI for United Airlines. There were only 10 to 12 people in the entire office. There were air carrier ops and maintenance ASIs as well as one GA person. We had a number of ops inspectors since Capital had about 50 [Vickers] Viscounts. The inspectors had to do all the checkrides.”

Two accidents involving Viscounts are deeply etched in Joe’s memory. “There was one in Virginia; all onboard were killed. The plane went into a flat spin and crashed almost vertically. We never did determine the cause. The aircraft was among the first to have turboprop engines. We had a hard time determining the cause of another Viscount accident until we found the horizontal stabilizer in the woods some distance from the main wreckage. We discovered that a Whistling Swan had flown into the stabilizer, fracturing the main spar.”

The energetic and determined ASI predictably gained solid traction on the promotion ladder. A year after his hire date he was promoted to Assistant PMI (GS-12), and just under two years after that, he became PMI (GS-13). In 1961, however, he made a giant leap that boosted his career even more. He was one of only 18 ASIs handpicked from over 300 applicants to operate as a Peace Officer. In the end, only 12 opted to stay in the program. “Operation Slingshot was,” he says, “the code name applied to the program of appointment, training, and deputizing of the first Peace Officers and the follow-on operation.” The Inspector-Officers were to help prevent air piracy

and other crimes aboard aircraft; they were to be the antidote to a spate of skyjackings that had occurred in 1961.

In 1962, Joe and his fellow ASIs were sworn in as Special U.S. Deputy Marshals by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, with Najeeb Halaby, the second FAA Administrator, in attendance. It was that big a deal. The select, traveling team performed their regular duties as ASIs but were on-call for Operation Slingshot assignments. Carrying tear-gas pens, handcuffs, and .38-cal. snub-nosed revolvers, the Peace Officers worked in pairs on flights until, says Joe, “they were honorably discharged in 1971, when Air Marshals were hired.”

The door that opened for Joe as a Peace Officer didn’t just expand his sphere for enforcing FAA regulations, it also led to other career opportunities. Joe left the Washington FSDO in 1962. Actually, Chris Walk, the Eastern Region Flight Standards Division Chief, told him to go to Newark (N.J.) “to clean it up.” As Joe explains, “The people were in bed with the carrier.” Not wanting to remain long in Newark, he left in 1963 for the San Francisco ACDO, where he became Assistant Chief in 1965. Next up was Seattle, where the focus was on the development of the Boeing 747 and a suitable maintenance program for overseeing it. The Maintenance Review Board was the outcome. Joe says, “The most interesting part of the job was watching the test where they broke the [747’s] wings.” He also experienced the thrill of observing the aircraft’s first flight.

Accepting a dramatic change in his life, Joe became the Air Carrier Specialist at the Brussels (Belgium) IFO in 1974, starting a long-time love affair with that nation. He left after four years to assume the position of Chief at the Rome IFO. After two years in that post, he returned to the U.S. and FAA Headquarters, where he held SES positions as the first Manager of the Aircraft Maintenance Division and, after, as the Deputy Director of the Office of Airworthiness. In 1985, the position of Manager of Flight Standards in Brussels opened up, and Joe joyfully returned to Belgium. In 1989, preparing to retire, he requested to return to FAA in Seattle. In 1990, he closed the FAA chapter of his life. Joe’s concluding remark about his time with the agency reveals much: “My only regret was that I couldn’t do it all over again.” He’s no ordinary Joe.

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TIRELESS GLOBETROTTERS. Joe and his wife, Viola (“Vi”), lived abroad on FAA assignments during many of his years with the agency. In retirement, the couple continues to travel often.