

From FAA Peace Officers to Air Marshals

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BY LONE ARMED PASSENGER

U.S. Airliner Hijacked, Forced Down In Cuba

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headline, May 2, 1961

On May 1, 1961, the first in a series of aircraft hijackings in the U.S. began when Puerto Rican national Antulio Ramirez Ortiz, with a knife and revolver, hijacked a National Airlines flight en route from Miami to Key West, Florida, to Havana, Cuba. After some two hours in Havana, all passengers except Ortiz returned to the United States. The *New York Times*, not knowing what to

call the hijacking, referred to the incident as a “forced detour.”

On July 24, Wilfredo Roman Oquendo, a naturalized American citizen of Cuban birth, forced an Eastern Airlines plane en route from Miami to Tampa, Florida, to travel to Havana. On July 31, emotionally distraught Bruce Britt tried to force a Pacific Airlines plane on the ground in Chico, California, to take him to his estranged wife in Arkansas. He shot, but did not kill, two airline employees. On August 3, Leon Bearden and his son Cody attempted to force a Continental Airlines plane flying from Los Angeles to Houston to divert to Cuba. The ordeal ended in El Paso, Texas during refueling when Border Patrol Agent Leonard Gilman, who had volunteered to be a hostage, punched Bearden with such force it shattered Gilman's hand. On August 10, Charles Caden forced a Pan American Airlines plane en route from Mexico City to Guatemala City to fly to Cuba.

This series of incidents revealed two problems areas: (1) There were no legal statutes applying to certain kinds of crime in the air, and (2) existing law applying to other crimes simply did not work. As a result of these hijackings, both the Senate and House of Representatives held hearings on how to combat air piracy. In Senate testimony on August 4, regarding proposed legislation, Federal Aviation Agency (FAA, established in late 1958 and now the Federal Aviation Administration) Administrator Najeeb Halaby applauded the draft bill, saying it: “provides very simply that air drunks and flying fools and spies in the sky will face not just local police or a defenseless girl or a preoccupied crew, but the full power of your Federal Government.”

At a press conference on August 10, after hearing about the Pan American hijacking, President John F. Kennedy, announced he had ordered “on a number of our planes a border patrolman who will ride on a number of our flights.” The officers from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service became the first federal employees to serve as armed guards on civilian airliners. The president also told the media, “We are also going to insist that every airplane lock its door, and that the door be strong enough to prevent entrance by force, and that the possession of the key be held by those inside the cabin so that pressure cannot be put on the members of the crew outside to have the door opened.”



The original peace officers in training class. Source: FAA

In 1961, FAA began training some of its own employees to replace the border patrol agents. In “Operation Slingshot,” which ran from 1961-1971, the FAA aviation safety inspectors (ASIs) to volunteer to become a peace officer. Three hundred ASIs initially applied for the positions. The agency selection 18 men for service, but, ultimately, only 12 opted to stay in the program during the first round of selections.

To become a peace officer, the ASIs trained at the Border Patrol Academy. In March 1962, Attorney General Robert F.

Kennedy swore in FAA's first peace officers, as Special U.S. Deputy Marshals. They only carried out their role as armed marshals on flights when specifically requested to do so by airline management or the FBI. They continued their ASI duties when not flying as peace officers. When on duty, they worked in pairs and carried tear-gas pens, handcuffs, and .38-cal. snub-nosed revolvers.

While the FAA trained its peace officers, on September 5, 1961, President Kennedy signed Public Law 87-197, an amendment to the Federal Aviation Act of 1958. The law prescribed death or imprisonment for not less than 20 years for interference with aircrew members or flight attendants in the performance of their duties. Pertinent parts of the U.S. Code were made applicable to certain other crimes aboard aircraft in flight.

On February 21, 1968, a sustained wave of U.S. air carrier hijackings began when a fugitive aboard a Delta Air Lines DC-8 forced the pilot to divert to Havana. By July 17, four more U.S. airliners had been diverted to the same destination. Two days later, the FAA announced that its peace officers, now referred to as sky marshals, had begun boarding Florida-bound airline flights. Hijackings continued, however, and a total of twelve airliners and six general aviation aircraft were diverted to Cuba during 1968.

Eight U.S. airliners were hijacked to Cuba during January 1969. On August 29, in the first hijacking of a U.S. aircraft outside of the Western Hemisphere, two Arabs seized control of a TWA 707 bound for Israel and diverted it to Syria, where they deplaned the occupants and then threw hand grenades into the cockpit area. This was followed on October 31, when Rafael Minichiello, a U.S. Marine absent without leave, commandeered a TWA 707 bound for San Francisco and embarked on a 17-hour journey that ended in Rome, Italy.

On March 17, 1970, the first death in a domestic U.S. aircraft hijacking incident occurred when a hijacker shot and killed the copilot on an Eastern Airlines shuttle. Although fatally wounded, the copilot managed to shoot and severely wound the hijacker with the latter's gun. The aircraft's captain, himself wounded in both arms, landed his DC-9 safely in Boston. In August, the first

hijacking of a wide-bodied airliner occurred as a Pan American 747 bound from New York to San Juan with 388 passengers was diverted to Havana.



The world watched anxiously when from September 6 through 9, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked four airliners over Europe, blew them up, and held many passengers hostage. The hijackers originally planned to seize two Israeli, one Swiss, and one U.S. aircraft, and take the planes to a level stretch of Jordanian desert dubbed "Revolution Airstrip." The plan failed insofar as the Israeli aircraft were concerned. Front members were refused admittance to one of them, whereupon they hijacked a U.S. flight. When they learned that the wide-body jet was too large to land at Revolution Airstrip, they ordered it to Cairo, where they blew it up after deplaning its occupants. Front members succeeded in boarding the other Israeli airliner, but their hijacking attempt was foiled in flight. One hijacker was killed and another arrested by British authorities when the plane landed in London.

The part of the original plan involving U.S. and Swiss airliners succeeded, and on September 6 these aircraft landed at Revolution Airstrip with all passengers. To gain bargaining power for the release of their member arrested in London, the Front hijacked a British airliner and forced it to land at Revolution Airstrip three days later. The Front blew up the three empty airliners on September 12. All hostages except six were freed on September 27. Those six were freed two days later, in return for the release of the hijacker under arrest in London and six other Front members held by the Swiss and West Germans.

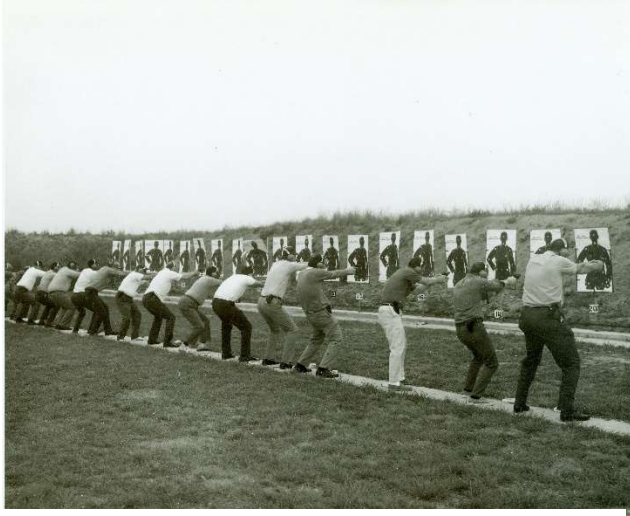
In response to the sustained hijackings, on September 11, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon announced a comprehensive antihijacking program that called for among other things:

- The creation of specially trained, armed guards on American commercial airline flights.
- Extending, under DOT auspices, the use of electronic and other surveillance techniques by U.S. flag carriers to all gateway airports in the U.S., and in other countries wherever possible.
- Accelerated efforts by Federal agencies to develop security measures, including new methods for detecting weapons and explosives devices.



Miami Herald headline, September 12, 1970

In response to the mandate to create the armed guard force, on October 28, 1970, the Departments of Transportation and Treasury



Sky marshals training at the Border Patrol Academy.
Source: FAA

agreed that the Bureau of Customs would recruit and train a permanent force of customs security officers who would be assigned to FAA for service as sky marshals aboard commercial passenger flights. The first class of these officers graduated on December 23, 1970. This interim force had consisted of both military personnel and civilian agents from the Treasury Department and other agencies, including FAA. In 1974, the FAA took over the air marshal program.