



FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE (2)



ROGER MORGAN (5)



*Air marshals train constantly and carry lots of equipment, all for one goal: to make sure every airplane passenger gets safely home.*

ISTOCKPHOTO/CARLOS SANTA MARIA

## Thanks to Federal Air Marshals like Ed Ronan, flying on a plane has never been safer.

BY MICHAEL GOLDMAN

**A**t 35,000 feet in the air, it's all on you.

Something goes wrong, you're the guy they turn to. There's no backup. There's no support. Something goes wrong, you're responsible for getting the plane and its passengers safely back on solid ground.

You're a Federal Air Marshal. There's no room for error.

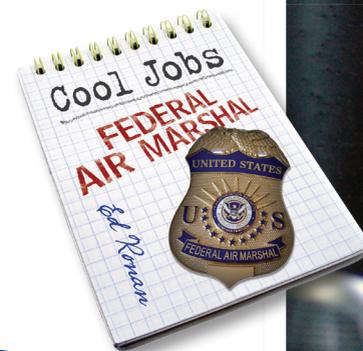
And it's all on you.

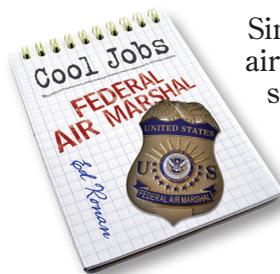
### No Pictures, Please

Federal Air Marshal Ed Ronan loves the challenge of being one of the guys everyone is counting on. Even if no one knows they are counting on him.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "the Federal Air Marshal Service promotes confidence in the nation's civil aviation system through the effective deployment of Federal Air Marshals to detect, deter and defeat hostile acts targeting U.S. air carriers, airports, passengers and crews." **CONTINUED >>>**

# eyes IN THE skies





Simply said, an air marshal is a supertrained police officer whose beat is the sky.

Air marshals have to work strictly undercover. On a flight, no passenger can know who they are. That's why you'll see no faces in these photographs. If we blow an air marshal's cover, we just might blow his career.

An air marshal might be sitting right behind you on your family's next flight. (If so, lucky you ... it'll be the safest flight you ever take.) But don't ask him or her — you would just make them have to tell a little white lie, and they hate that.

And don't bother trying to spot an air marshal on the plane. They come in all shapes and sizes. The air marshal might be Ed Ronan, a big, hulking adult Eagle Scout fit more for a football field than an airplane seat. Or it might be the woman, about half Ronan's size, who accompanies him. A criminal wouldn't want to take his

chances with either of them.

Ronan and his buddies are the kinds of men and women the bad guys mess with only once.

### Losing Is Not An Option

Ed Ronan knew early on that he wanted to work in law enforcement. His brother was a police officer and his dad served in the U.S. Navy, so life in uniform was nothing new to him. His career started out simply enough, as a jailer for the Virginia Beach, Va., Sheriff's Office, and Ed was pretty happy.

Then Sept. 11, 2001, hit — that date now known as 9/11, when terrorists hijacked airplanes and used them to attack the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and caused an airplane heading for D.C. to crash in Pennsylvania.

"After 9/11, everyone had the feeling they wanted to do something more," Ronan says. "A little bit grander than what they had been doing. I saw the news segments on the training of the Federal Air Marshals and thought it looked like really cool training."

That training is brutal. At the FAM



MICHAEL GOLDMAN (4)

**FAMs train in a simulated airplane interior, which is like a real plane in just about every way, right down to the drink carts in the aisles. Except in the simulator, trainers can easily pump in smoke, mess with the lighting and create a chaotic scene.**

training center, it's not uncommon to see trainees nursing bruises — or worse — with ice bags. The instructors don't get off easily either. Though they are heavily padded, full-on body blows still sting.

Think of a wrestling match with no rules and the loser of which just might be killed. When it's all on you, you'd better not be the loser.

"In our training, the good guy never, ever loses," says Supervisory Federal Air Marshal Chris Springer. "It doesn't matter what injuries they might have sustained, we make them fight through it. Because we will win, and we will go home at the end of the day. Losing is not an option."

### Get Fit Or Get Out

It might be brutal, but training is Ed Ronan's favorite part of the job.

"I've always liked the training part," he says. "You can go days on an airplane, alert, doing your job, but not really *doing* it. In training you get the chance to have that situation, that adrenaline bump."

Good thing for Ronan, then, that air marshals are constantly training. There are five required training days every three months, including firearms qualification and a fitness assessment. That's about four times as often, if not more, than a typical cop's training requirement.

But that's just the required training. Most marshals have gym memberships and gun-range memberships, work out five or six days a week and shoot regularly. Spending hours and days on an airplane makes it easy to get out of



ROGER MORGAN (2)

**Air marshals practice shooting a lot. A high shooting score for a local police officer would be a very low score for a Federal Air Marshal.**

shape quickly, if you don't stick with it.

"Fitness just makes everything easier," Ronan says. "Even in school, when you have that PE class in the middle of the day, if you're not in shape you'll be tired the rest of the day. The better shape you're in, the less that wears on you — in school or in my job."

Being in shape also helps you react in a high-stress situation. And at 35,000 feet, we need our air marshals to be able to react.

## Simply said, an air marshal is a supertrained police officer whose beat is the sky.

### Safety: Top Priority

When he is on a flight, Ronan looks just like an average traveler.

"I'm mixing in, blending in with everyone else. I try to take everything in and do things as discreetly as possible without anyone noticing. Of course, I can't just hop on the plane and go to sleep. I have to pay a lot more attention to what's going on around me."

The pilot will know he's on board, as will the flight attendants, in case they need to call on him to help solve a problem or watch a suspicious passenger.

Not every flight has a marshal on it. But you'll never know which ones do. There are thousands of men and women flying as air marshals every day. Sometimes they are assigned to a flight because of a specific threat; other times they are flying at random. Sometimes, it's just the possibility that an armed marshal might be aboard a plane that will keep a bad guy at bay.

When he's flying, a successful day for Ronan is one that simply ends with

him being greeted at home by his two dogs and his wife, who also works with the air marshal service. Because when Ronan goes home safely, that means hundreds of other people do, too.

So, should the public feel safe on an airplane?

"Yes. Absolutely," Ronan says. "From the experiences I have had and the things I have seen behind the scenes, I can honestly say, 'Yes, you are safe.'"

And Federal Air Marshal Ed Ronan should know. At 35,000 feet, our safety is all on him. ✦

### THE 20 LAYERS OF AIRPLANE SECURITY

Airplane security starts before a person ever gets on an airplane. It begins when someone buys a ticket, and an extensive computer network goes to work checking each and every passenger. Then starts the Transportation Security Administration's "curb to cockpit approach." TSA is much more than the screening officers you see at the security check, making passengers take off their shoes and belts and walk through metal detectors. There are many more levels of security you don't see (and, hopefully, never will).

Federal Air Marshals (and a volunteer group of trained pilots called Federal Flight Deck Officers) are among the last lines of defense. Even if a bad guy happens to get through one layer of security, chances are he won't get past the next one, much less all 20.

For details on the 20 levels of airplane security, which range from early ground-based intelligence on up to the passengers themselves, go to [boyslife.org/airsecure](http://boyslife.org/airsecure).

**FAMs use a variety of firearms to train. All are based on the standard-issue SIG P229 .357 semi-automatic pistol (top) and colored for safety. SIGs painted blue shoot paintball-like rounds; the black-and-red SIG fires no projectile but gives the marshal the feeling of a real shot; the all-red SIG does not fire.**



### JOB FACTS: FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL

The Transportation Security Administration says that as a Federal Air Marshal, you will detect, deter and defeat hostile acts against U.S. air carriers, passengers and crews. You will be an armed federal law enforcement officer, deployed on passenger flights worldwide to protect airline passengers and crew against the risk of criminal and terrorist violence.

### EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE:

Previous law-enforcement or military experience is helpful. A college degree is required for the best chances for promotion. "I can't stress it enough," says Federal Air Marshal Ed Ronan. "Go to school. Get in shape. And find a mentor, someone who has done it before, who can tell you what to expect."

### OTHER REQUIREMENTS:

FAMs complete 16½ weeks of academy training and 40 hours of training every three months while on duty. ... The air marshal service has the highest firearms proficiency requirement of any law-enforcement agency. ... Candidates must complete an application process that includes mental health and psychological suitability screening, a panel interview, drug test, background investigation, and a medical and fitness evaluation.

### DUTIES:

Air marshals typically rotate assignments among air- and ground-based operations. Ground-based operations include training, operations and gathering intelligence.

### SALARY:

FAM salaries start at about \$40,000 per year and go up to more than \$100,000 with experience.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Check out the Transportation Security Administration's website, [boyslife.org/links/tsa](http://boyslife.org/links/tsa), and the Department of Homeland Security, [boyslife.org/links/dhs](http://boyslife.org/links/dhs).



**Federal Air Marshals train often in hand-to-hand combat. Yes, it hurts. A lot.**



**Left: The F in FAM stands for "federal." But it might well stand for "fitness." Field offices and training centers have state-of-the-art equipment to keep air marshals in top shape. Right: BOBs — body opponent bags — help save wear and tear on marshals' bodies during training.**