

The *UP*date – Summer 2018

By Ryan Zaroni

Pilot Profile: Russell Atanasio

At Wheels Up, a crucial part of our mission to deliver the best possible membership experience is choosing the right people to get you, your families, and your colleagues to your destinations safely. Our highly trained Gama Aviation pilots are the most skilled and experienced in the industry, with an average of over 7,000 flight hours under their belts. They're also some of the most interesting people we know. We recently had the pleasure of speaking with one of them: Russell Atanasio, a Standards Captain and Check Airman.

How long have you been flying as a pilot? How did you get started, and what led you to join Gama Aviation and fly Wheels Up?

RA: I got my private rating in 1986. I was in the military, in SOCOM— Special Ops Command—for 8 years, and was on airborne jump status my entire career. I also did skydiving through the Army MWR (Morale, Welfare, and Recreation division). Jumping out of the planes, I thought, *I want to learn how to fly these things*. I went on to get my ratings, got out of the army, and joined the FBI as a Special Agent. I did a variety of things with the bureau over 20 years, including flying several different aircraft—among them Gulfstreams and Citations. I started flying in NYC, then left to join the Hostage Rescue Team and got assigned to Denver, CO. Eventually, I returned to flying.

After 9/11, I was making a lot of overseas trips to Afghanistan and Iraq. The FBI had developed a worldwide presence in the wake of the attacks, as we needed to move agents and evidence all over the globe. In October 2008, I retired from the FBI's special flight ops unit, because I wanted to get into corporate aviation, but it was the worst possible time: during the financial crisis. So, what did I do? I'm not the kind of person to retire and just hunt, camp, and fish. I went back to what I know best: I flew supplemental missions in combat zones in the Middle East as a defense contractor, because the military didn't have enough pilots and aircraft to meet the operational tempo. I had one break, during which I flew some charter planes and Falcon jets. Then, I went back to defense contracting from 2008-2015, spending almost all that time doing rotations in the Middle East, as well as some missions in Colombia. After 7 more years of that, I had had enough of being away from home 60-90 days at a clip. I found out about Wheels Up and Gama and started flying for them in November of 2015.

What's one of your most memorable stories?

RA: On 9/11, I was going to do a routine mission for the FBI. Director Robert Mueller had called an all-SAC (Special Agent in Charge) conference—so all 56 SACs from the US and our territories were in Washington, DC when 9/11 hit. The entire US airspace was being shut down; only military and medivac aircraft were flying. Mueller told all the SACs, "We are under attack. I need all of you to go back to your divisions and get to work." Terrorism was always high on the FBI's list of priorities, but after 9/11, it shot far above everything else. So that day, I was going to work in Denver, CO, where I was stationed, when I heard on the radio that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. I thought it was a helicopter or sightseeing tour plane that got too close. Then I heard 20 minutes later that the second tower had been hit. I said, "Oh my God, we're under attack."

My partner and I, reunited after flying in NY together when we had first started, got into the hangar. We had a King Air F90 in the hangar in Denver, CO. Our boss got on the phone and told us, "Fly to DC, pick up our SAC, stuff as many other SACs in the aircraft as you can, and drop 'em off wherever they need to go." We called local air traffic control in Denver and told them, "This is a high-priority mission—we have to do this." FBI headquarters was going nuts, especially because the Pentagon had been hit. After 6 more calls, we flew from

Denver to DC, picked up as many Special Agents as possible, and wound up in Portland, OR the following night, 9/12.

What has been the greatest challenge for you in your career as a pilot?

RA: Flying overseas in combat zones for the US Department of Defense. Much of the Middle East is a fairly hazardous environment, and military procedures are different from the norm. We had to adapt to the way the military operates. Living conditions are fairly austere when you do those missions—I lived in a tent for months. When you're doing this work, you're not being unsafe, but you're definitely pushing the envelope because that's what it requires.

What's it like being a pilot for Gama and Wheels Up? What do you enjoy most about the job?

RA: There's so much great synergy between Gama and Wheels Up—they're really joined at the hip. The greatest asset in any business is your people, and both companies know that. Both companies treat us extremely well and take very good care of us.

What I like most about the job are the people I work with: the pilots, maintenance staff, flight followers, and Wheels Up sales reps. I always have a positive experience with them. Everyone here is very mission-focused, which is very important to me. And the customers are great people.

The other thing I love is that flying is always a challenge: We're always going somewhere different, and we often don't know where we're headed next. We recently had 2 legs get cancelled and another 2 thrown at us. So, we have to be flexible. It's the dynamic nature of the missions we do.

What are your favorite routes to fly on the Wheels Up fleet?

RA: There are very few places I don't like. I love flying out west. On my last tour, I was in Telluride, CO, which is stunning. I used to fly out there when I was in the FBI. I know the terrain very well. I really like flying to the islands, too. The view of the Caribbean from up high in the plane is just phenomenal.

What do you think is the best thing about the King Air 350i and/or Citation jets?

RA: The King Air 350i is a workhorse. It's the ultimate utilitarian aircraft. The airplanes I flew overseas were 350i modified for the military. That environment is extremely harsh, and those airplanes kept going and going. They were flown around the clock: a crew would take them up for 5 or 6 hours on a mission, then they'd be down for a couple hours for maintenance, and the next crew would take them up for another 5 or 6 hours. For these missions of 500-700 nautical miles or less—economically, you can't beat the 350i. Its robustness and dependability are unrivaled. It's one of very few turboprops of that class still being manufactured.

I also love flying the Citation X. It's a great airplane, and I've really enjoyed learning it. I was in the first group to go through school for it. I was a Check Airman in the King Air 350i; now I'm a captain in the Citation X, and this is my 4th tour in the aircraft. Every client who thought he or she was getting on a King Air and ended up being put on a X has said, "Man, I love this airplane!"