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Joe Renis after his final flight as a USAF fighter pilot, Tyndall AFB, Florida, 1999. Courtesy photo

Into the wild blue yonder

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Joe Renis during USAF pilot training at Vance AFB, Oklahoma, 1980. Courtesy photo

Joe Renis is a twice-retired pilot, first from the United States Air Force, then from commercial aviation. But he insists he never worked a day in his life.

"I loved all of it. It was never, 'Oh, I have to go to work today,'" says the Kewadin resident of the careers that gave him a sky-high view of much of the United States, Europe, and parts of Central America. "I had a huge office window."

Joe's desire to start with a military flying career was locked in by his senior year (1974-1975) at Traverse City High School (now TC Central HS). Because the Vietnam War was winding down and the armed forces were shrinking as a result, he says the only way to guarantee pilot training was to attend a service academy. He considered both the USAF and the U.S. Coast Guard and wrote letters to his congressional senators and representatives seeking a nomination.

By the time he graduated, Joe had secured a nomination from then U.S. Representative Al Cederberg and an appointment to the USAF Academy in Colorado Springs. "That was a big thing to get," he says. "I didn't have other plans. I had applied to a few universities, but my main goal was to go to the Academy."

Joe's freshman class would be the final all-male graduating class as then U.S. President Gerald Ford signed a law in October 1975 that would allow females to enter military academies beginning the following year. "That created a lot of turmoil my first year," he recalls.

Joe Renis shares the cockpit with grandson, Ben, on the last day of Joe's 20-year career as a commercial airline pilot. Courtesy photo

But what he remembers more is the purposeful intensity of the rigorous academic, military, and athletic training that would define his four years there and prepare him for future success as a commissioned USAF officer.

"It was a fire hose," Joe says. "It's hard to describe. You try to survive. Every teacher thinks theirs is the only class, so you learn to assess what's important and what can wait. You learn time management. As I look back at the breadth of experience, it was very well rounded."

Forty-six years later, he still easily recalls the feeling of accomplishment finishing his last final exam in May 1979. "You pack up and walk the campus, and you go, 'I did it,'" he says. "There's a big sigh and you just relax. You think about all the people you're not going to see for a while or maybe ever, but you're ready for the next adventure."

As a newly commissioned second lieutenant with a bachelor's of science degree in mechanical engineering, Joe's first stop was the Airborne Laser Laboratory at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He spent a month there assisting with the conceptual development of gas lasers mounted in a military-grade Boeing 707 to destroy airborne targets. "The concepts they were talking about were really interesting," Joe says. "Chemistry and electricity are magic to me. And I got to meet some very interesting people."

Then it was on to Vance AFB in Oklahoma for pilot training. Months of ground school included Federal Aviation Administration navigation, aerodynamics, academics, and simulators. Three segments of flight training (instruments, maneuvers, and formations) followed in the Cessna T-37 jet and the Northrop T-38 Talon supersonic jet, earning Joe his USAF wings in August 1980.

His first assignment was Shaw AFB in South Carolina flying a Cessna O-2 Skymaster (a militarized Cessna 337) as a forward air controller, coordinating aerial firepower in support of ground forces. But, he says, flying an O-2 "wasn't all that exciting," so he decided to add to the parachute training he had received at the Academy by attending the U.S. Army's Advanced Airborne (Jumpmaster) School at nearby Fort Bragg AFB in North Carolina.

"I was single at the time, and it was something to do," Joe says. "I ended up with 35 jumps total."

Over the next 17 years, Joe's military service took him to Luke AFB in Arizona for F-15 pilot training; Bitburg AB in Germany where he worked with NATO forces prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall; Tyndall AFB in Florida (twice); Naval Air Station Keflavik in

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Joe Renis has transported a number of VIPs on commercial flights including former astronaut and fighter pilot Buzz Aldrin (left). Courtesy photo

Iceland; Langley AFB in Virginia; and Otis Air National Guard Base in Massachusetts.

In Bitburg, Joe's call sign (specialized nickname), "Hoser," was bestowed on him by his peers. He smiles as he explains its connection to the early 1980s "Great White North" comedic skits featuring two fictional Canadian brothers who called each other and fellow countrymen hosers. "I was from Michigan, so I talked like them. (The call sign) sticks with you the whole rest of your career."

Joe's Air Force assignments were varied and included instructor pilot and flight examiner, air defense alert and worldwide tactical flight operations, program manager, and chief of First Air Force standardization/evaluation. Along the way, he attended the USAF Air War College and picked up a master's degree in management from Webster University.

He calls his year in Iceland (1990), the "year on the rock." It holds unique memories not just of flying air defense alert, but also of the aurora borealis that would empty houses as people rushed outside "to watch it shoot right over the top. It was absolutely amazing." While there, Joe flew the F-15 Eagle tactical fighter jet, escorting Soviet air bombers as they came through that air space toward Cuba.

"We'd get IDs on them, take photos, see what bombers they were flying, and get pictures of their modifications," Joe says. At the same time he adds, "They were looking for our submarines. We shadowed them, so they started trying to mess with us by shooting lasers at our eyes to blind us. So, we wore laser goggles. You don't need a war. You're fighting for something every single day."

Joe retired in July 1999 as a Lieutenant Colonel. Knowing he wanted to take his aviation and leadership skillset to the commercial industry, he had begun applying to domestic airlines, eventually signing with Frontier Airlines flying B-737s. Over his 20-year commercial aviation career, Joe also flew DC-9s for Northwest Airlines, regional jets for Pinnacle Airlines, and B-717s, A-319/320s and DC-9s for the merger of Northwest and Delta Airlines.

Of the transition from fighter jets to commercial aircraft, Joe says, "Flying is flying. It doesn't matter how fast. What's interesting are the rules. Company's airplane, company's rules. You're on a schedule, you get a list of places to be, when to go, and you just knock that out. Even when flying, you're not in charge of the airplane. But with the military, it was plan a mission, do it in a $48 million airplane, and bring it back in one piece. In the Navy, the rules are, 'If they don't say you can't do it, you can do it.' In the Air Force, it's 'If they don't say you can, you can't.'"

While in the USAF, Joe and his wife, Carol (he met the fellow Michigander while stationed in South Carolina where she was training hunter and jumper horses) lived wherever his work took him, excepting Iceland when Carol and their daughter, Rebecca, four years old at the time, stayed behind at Tyndall AFB in Florida.

Following his military retirement, they could call any place "home," as long as he could commute to the domicile of whatever commercial airline he flew for. So, Joe brought his family back to northern Michigan and moved to a property adjacent to his parents.

"Of all the places in the world I've seen, I've never found a prettier place than here," Joe says. "There are some that are close, but the water here, the trees, the change of seasons, nothing beats it."

Even after retiring from two aviation careers, the itch to remain connected to flying stuck around for a couple of years. From 2021 to 2023 Joe worked part-time as an instructor for Delta Professional Services, teaching simulator training on Boeing 717s in Hawaii, spending two weeks each month there.

"The first time was really neat," he recalls. "The second time was not too bad. Then I realized I was over there more than here. After the first summer, I asked if I could take summers off, because it was nicer here than there. They said no, so I quit. Smartest move I ever made."

Though fully enjoying retirement for the last two years, Joe's far from idle. He loves spending time with five-year-old grandson, Ben, continues his lifelong passion of downhill skiing, serves as a trustee for Milton Township and as a member of its planning committee, serves on the Antrim County Veterans Affairs Committee, has volunteered with the Antrim County Commission on Aging, and is the proud Commander of American Legion Post 350 in Elk Rapids. And he and Carol are making travel plans to trace their military career, visiting all the places they were stationed; he's especially eager to show her Iceland, the only assignment he did without her.

The trips will give Joe a chance to review and reflect upon the first two decades of a high-flying career that was everything he hoped it would be. "I worked with the best people under the best training with the best equipment in the most interesting environment," he says. "It's the coolest thing I ever did. Challenging? Yeah. Cool? Hell, yeah."