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From Passé Baggage Control Questions to Emerging Mental Health Challenges:

TIME TO CHANGE THE FOCUS

by Philip Baum

It is all too easy to criticise measures introduced to safeguard civil aviation from acts of unlawful interference. When it comes down to it, we do a pretty good job at protecting the industry, its employees and users. After all there are around 40 million flights every year, and last year more than four billion passengers took to the skies with no lives being lost as a result of criminal activity. There have been skirmishes on the ground that have resulted in fatalities and serious injuries and we certainly have a major challenge to address in terms of unruly passenger behaviour, but we should be satisfied that the security processes, procedures, technologies, checks and balances that we have put in place have only enhanced aviation's reputation as being the safest form of transport.

Then again, unlike other transportation modes, it only takes one incident for the faith we place in our countermeasures to be shaken to the core. Complacency is often cited as the greatest threat to civil aviation – the belief that we have done what is necessary and/or that the threat has either diminished or that the target has moved on elsewhere. For that reason, we must continue to strive to address emerging threats proactively and question whether the measures we are implementing are really fit for purpose.

We can all cite examples of measures that seem to defy logic. I was checking in for a flight recently and decided to screenshot the following:

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. Could anyone have interfered with your bags since you packed them?

2. Has anyone given you anything to carry on the flight?

3. Do you have any sharp items in your hand baggage?

● 'No' to all questions

○ 'Yes' to any of the questions

NEXT

This, to me, is an example of measures being taken in the name of security yet, in all honesty, is purely there to cover the airline (and this is now standard practice for many carriers) against any claim. Passengers routinely check in online 24 hours before flight departure, yet how many of them have actually packed their bags at the point in time when they are being asked such 'security' questions? The questionnaire forced me to lie as there was not even the option to declare that I had not yet packed my bags! What kind of security measure encourages deception? The baggage control questions were designed to be asked by a screener able to evaluate the way in which the passenger answered the questions, but by striving for total automation we are guilty of dumbing down security to the point of being compliant but not effective. Questions of this nature were designed to identify the duped passenger, or mule, and as such need to be posed at the last possible point in time where the passenger could have become the unwitting infiltrator of an improvised explosive device onto an aircraft.

The same is true for aircraft search procedures. Yes, many aircraft are 'searched' prior to passenger boarding but can we, as security professionals, be truly satisfied that the methodology we are using is actually designed to identify prohibited items secreted on board by either an inbound passenger or crewmember or an insider at the airport? If the latter, then the search must, by definition, take place after all other servicing tasks (cleaning, catering etc.) have been completed. And regardless as to who infiltrated the device onto the aircraft, the search, if it's worth doing it all, must be done comprehensively. Looking in the overhead compartments and beneath a couple of seats is tokenistic at best.

"…the questionnaire forced me to lie as there was not even the option to declare that I had not yet packed my bags…"

All security measures come at a cost and, as with any business, one has to work within a budget. That is, however, where government has its role to play in ensuring that minimum (I'd prefer to say optimum) standards are met and that airlines and airports are not wasting expenditure on pointless exercises.

In a blue-skies thinking world where we wish to use technology to its best advantage – if the objective is to prevent improvised explosive devices being infiltrated onto aircraft whilst at the same time addressing the insider threat – surely our screening processes should take place on board the aircraft. In our technology wish list, rather than focusing on checkpoint screening technologies, shouldn't we be asking manufacturers to design systems, which can identify prohibited substances as they are loaded onto aircraft or once they are on board?

Shouldn't we also be embracing a broader use of canine units for searching aircraft more effectively and efficiently prior to passenger boarding? Shouldn't we be incorporating security technologies onto aircraft that are designed to identify stowaways, record the actions of unruly passengers and ensure that an aircraft be disabled in the event that it be moved without proper authorisation?

We focus almost excessively on the passenger screening checkpoint, but must now take significant strides towards protecting ourselves from the actions of

the insiders – be they mechanics able to power-up aircraft, take off and fly on suicidal missions or airside employees capable of ensuring a prohibited item bypasses security screening – unruly passengers (according to Forbes, "approximately 30 serious 'unruly passenger' incidents take place every day over the skies of the United States"), stowaways, and the significant number of people who have mental health issues.

In respect of the latter, perhaps ICAO, which has always been driven to respond to the terrorist threat to civil aviation, should start to focus its proactive measures on devising strategies able to deter and prevent people with mental health illnesses from achieving their goals. Arguably the actions of the likes of Andreas Lubitz (the Germanwings pilot) and Richard Russell (the Horizon Air mechanic) are more likely to be copied in the future than those of the perpetrators of 9/11. We can't palm this off as being a 'safety' concern rather than a 'security' remit – negative intent, whatever the cause or justification, is a security challenge.

Some disturbing statistics from the UK illustrate the challenge ahead. According to a 2018 study by the Children's Society charity, nearly a quarter of girls aged 14 have self-harmed in the past year and nearly 110,000 children aged 14 may have self-harmed across the UK during the same 12-month period, including 76,000 girls and 33,000 boys. These teenagers are tomorrow's employees. And, according to the mental health charity MIND, "Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year", and "In England, 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week."

In a 2016 study published by Environmental Health entitled 'Airplane pilot mental health and suicidal thoughts: a cross-sectional descriptive study via anonymous web-based survey', it was found that "1837 pilots (52.7%) of the 3485 surveyed pilots completed the survey, and that 193 (13.5%) of 1430 pilots who reported working as an airline pilot in the last seven days at time of survey", met

"…Seventy-five participants reported having suicidal thoughts within the past two weeks…"

the depression threshold. "Seventy-five participants (4.1%) reported having suicidal thoughts within the past two weeks."

Translate those figures into numbers we can better comprehend and we find that equates to "5,700 out of a total of about 140,000 airline pilots worldwide".

As an ardent proponent of behavioural analysis, I find this a compelling argument for better scrutiny of all who board aircraft by profilers and a very useful statistic to highlight that profiling should not be on racial grounds. Terrorism is, after all, only one of the threats we face. Common sense demands we stop the exclusive focus on the detection of explosives and broaden our scope to fulfil the true objectives of ICAO's Security Annex 17 to the Convention on International Civil Aviation, that being 'Safeguarding International Civil Aviation against Acts of Unlawful Interference', not just the actions of terrorists. ◼