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FROM FRONTLINE INTERNATIONAL

The Sun Doesn't Always Shine

by Philip Baum

"ANY ORGANISATION OR INSTITUTION THAT IS ABLE TO WIELD POWER NEEDS TO EXERCISE THAT PRIVILEGE WITH DUE CARE"

Any security breach should be regarded as a serious matter by people who have the best interest of the flying public at heart. Yet the question as to how such breaches should be brought to our attention is of equal concern. We need to expose security lapses without playing into the hands of those who wish to exploit the weaknesses of the web we weave. The role of the journalist must be examined.

On January 20th 1999 The Sun, a newspaper (and I use the term with some reservation) ran as its front page headline "Heathrow Scandal Exposed By The Sun". The report itself, found on the inside pages, was headlined "I Could Have Put A Bomb On A Jumbo: Ten Years After Lockerbie, Heathrow Security Still A Shambles". Whilst the article certainly highlighted a serious breakdown in the security process, it also sensationalised the incident to such an extent that one would have believed that there was a deliberate attempt by the authorities to put passengers lives at risk.

With regard to the allegations themselves, in which a reporter obtained access to aircraft (having applied to Skyliner Services for a job as a cleaner providing false references and then been issued with a Temporary ID), the government acted quickly and demanded a full explanation. The issuance of Temporary IDs has long been a point of debate, and I certainly have qualms about the lack of background checks for new hires that are awaiting full approval to work in restricted zones. Albeit that such personnel are supposed to be escorted at all times, we all know that in reality there is little point in hiring a cleaner that you then have to stand alongside whilst they perform their duties. In short, it's great theory but somewhat impractical and it's a policy that is almost guaranteed not to be adhered to. That, however, is another debate.

Adam Lee-Potter, the journalist in question, writes as if he was concerned about the fate of passengers using London Heathrow. His article, however, actually jeopardises lives by its sweeping statements and scare-mongering. We understand the limitations of X-ray machines, yet to write that "a lump of Semtex explosive...does NOT show up on X-rays" shows his failure to comprehend security practices and, whilst he might want alarm bells to ring when explosives are detected, we are concerned with any image that displays absence of the normal or presence of the abnormal. He writes about his ability to take a mobile phone and a

camera airside and states how these items could be component parts of a bomb. In reality, so could his wristwatch, so could his cleaning fluids, so could any number of items. The fact is they were not parts of a bomb. No bomb was taken airside. No screener failed in his duty. And, the professionalism and calibre of those involved in security operations at London Heathrow are to be lauded rather than belittled.

And it's not only the reporter that makes exaggerated allegations. The paper itself goes on to say "Airlines proudly boast that flying is one of the safest ways to travel. But The Sun's investigation into security at Heathrow airport makes nonsense of that claim". Are there some startling new statistics available that I have not seen regarding airline safety? Is there a major cover-up? No, the only thing that's nonsense is The Sun's claim.

You might, reasonably, ask why one should be concerned about such tabloid journalism. What's The Sun after all? Well it might not be The Times, Le Figaro, Die Welt, The Herald Tribune, The Washington Post or even The Daily Express, but it is the most widely read daily newspaper in the United Kingdom. It has power, and any organisation or institution that is able to wield power needs to exercise that privilege with due care. Care, that in this instance, was somewhat lacking.

The Sun has succeeded in raising some genuine security concerns, despite the one-liners. In any airport the size of Heathrow there has to be some reliance, on each of the different agencies and companies authorised to work there, to carry out the prescribed security measures. It would seem that Skyliner Services failed to treat the security procedures with the respect they deserve and that the most basic of checks were not carried out. I would argue that that demonstrates the need for frequent drills to be carried out by the airport authorities and government security inspectors in order to both identify security weaknesses and to reduce the possibility for sensation-seeking journalists to capitalise from the breaches unearthed.

The government's reaction to the report deserves praise, and I can't argue with the fact that a fundamental issue concerning aviation security is on the discussion table. Let's just make sure that the industry itself identifies weaknesses and carries out a spot of DIY when necessary to prevent the journalists having their day in The Sun.