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The Ides of March *the Vnukovo Airlines hijack*

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an A to Z of X-ray technology

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being taken for a ride

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cabin initiatives

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violence prediction on the ground



In Memory of Yulia Fomina and Kampol Meerlap

by Philip Baum

Beware The Ides of March. Only this time the victim was not Caesar...

At 1130am on 15th March 2001, the Ides of March, a Vnukovo Airlines flight departed Istanbul in Turkey for its scheduled flight to the Russian capital, Moscow. There were 174 people on board, mostly Russians and a significant number of Turkish passengers too. It was to be the target of a terrorist hijacking, a phenomena that appears to be making a return to haunt the aviation industry.

Since the Indian Airlines hijack on Christmas Eve 1999, there have been a number of high profile incidents of aerial piracy. Ariana Afghan was hijacked to London in May 2000, a Saudia flight was hijacked to Iraq in October 2000, another Vnukovo Airlines aircraft was hijacked to Ovda in Israel in November 2000, a SATE-NA plane was commandeered in Colombia this January, and Qatar Airways, Xinhua

Airlines, Yemena and Royal Jordanian have all been targeted in the last few months. And terrorism, rather than asylum seeking, has been the cause on an increasing number of occasions.

The Vnukovo hijack was not the only incident in recent years to involve Turkey. In October 1999 a hijacker, armed with a knife, commandeered a Cairo-bound Egyptair flight to Hamburg shortly after take-off from Istanbul. In October 1998, Turkish special forces freed passengers and crew aboard a Turkish Airlines plane after a seven-hour stand-off at Ankara airport. The hijacker, who was armed with a hand grenade and a gun, was shot dead. The security forces said he was a left-wing militant protesting against the war with the Kurds in south-east Turkey. In September 1998, two armed hijackers surrendered to the authorities in northern Turkey after freeing more than 70 passengers and crew

unharmd. In March 1998, a Turkish man was arrested in Ankara after trying to hijack a Cyprus Turkish Airways B-727 on a flight from northern Nicosia to Ankara. And, a month earlier, another Turkish citizen took control of a Turkish Airlines flight from Adana to Ankara, forcing it to land at the south-eastern city of Diyarbakir.

This March's incident was perpetrated by Chechen rebels demanding an end to Russia's military occupation of Chechnya.

The hijackers took control of the Tupolev-154 shortly after take-off. Armed only with knives, yet also claiming to have bombs, the hijackers stabbed a steward in their attempt to gain access to the cockpit. The aircraft went into a dive, yet was soon stabilised after a 400 metre plunge.

The new destination was set: the holy city of Medina in Saudi Arabia, where it landed some three hours later. Negotiations commenced, and within hours the hijackers released about 20 women, children and the elderly. Shortly afterwards another group of about 15 hostages reportedly escaped from the aircraft using a rear exit. By late evening the total number of people released had risen to 45.

Early the next morning the hijackers demanded fuel to fly to Qandahar, Afghanistan. Considering that Qandahar was Taliban territory and that armed intervention in Afghanistan would be almost impossible, the Saudis stalled. The "successful" hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight to Qandahar, inasmuch as the terrorists achieved many of their objectives, was not a scenario the Russians or the Saudis



A hijacked Vnukovo Airlines jet on the runway at Ovda, Israel on 12 November 2000. (Photo: Popperfoto/Reuters)



The Thai Airways B-737 on the tarmac in Bangkok. The bomb blast killed one flight attendant and injured seven others. (Photo: Popperfoto/Reuters)

wished to see repeated. Negotiations eventually broke down and there was a real feeling that the Chechen terrorists might actually activate an explosive device. There was no alternative. Saudi commandos stormed the aircraft.

Yulia Fomina, a 27-year old flight attendant with a nine year old child, was killed in the assault. Although it appeared that her throat had been slit by the hijackers, it later became apparent that it was the bullets from a commandos weapon that had actually killed her, as one of the Chechens had used her as a human shield. A Turkish passenger, 27-year old Gursel Kambal, and one of the three hijackers also died during the raid.

Albeit that any death in such circumstances is tragic, it has to be viewed in context. The elite Saudi force had managed to save the lives of the other passengers and crew.

For the airline industry, however, we had lost one of our own. As she was laid to rest Yuri Sytkin, Flight Director of Vnukovo Airlines, paid tribute to Yulia. "It is so sad that on such a bright day we have to put such a young person into the earth," he said.

But March was not only a month in which terrorists wielded their strength by hijacking an airliner. Sabotage was also to rear its ugly head again and another flight attendant, on another carrier, was to be

the victim of terror.

A Thai Airways B-737-400 was preparing to depart Bangkok for the northern Thai city of Chang Mai. Thailand's Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was due to board the flight and be seated, alongside his son, in 11A and 11B.

Thirty-five minutes before departure an explosion occurred underneath those very seats. Seven of the airline's staff were injured and one flight attendant, Kampol Meerlap,

"...it is so sad that on such a bright day we have to put such a young person in the earth..."

was killed while preparing the front section of the aircraft. Fortunately neither the passengers nor the flight deck had boarded the aircraft at the time. The fire that followed the blast consumed the aircraft.

Whilst the cause of the explosion has yet to be officially confirmed, it would appear that a bomb, using a white phosphorous charge, placed near seats 11A and 11B had detonated. The objective: assassination.

The Prime Minister had made many enemies when he pledged to crack down on drug smuggling, most of which he blamed on drug lords in neighbouring Myanmar and other

opium traffickers in the Golden Triangle.

The Thai Defence Minister stated that "It was high powered C-4 which tore into the ground and blew off the roof. It was a small charge, just quarter of a pound. Only international terrorist groups and highly trained agencies know how to make this kind of bomb."

What is the message we can take from these incidents? Perhaps the most important one is that we dispel the myth that "it

won't happen to us". There is a resurgence of terrorist attacks against civil aviation. Our duty is to respond. We have the technology. We have the manpower. Now we need the belief too. Belief that our measures can prevent such attacks. This means paying more than just lip-service to our procedures. It means training and testing our staff. It means resisting complacency. It means being proactive, rather than reactive. If we can increase our level of vigilance as a response to such acts, then perhaps Yulia Fomina and Kampol Meerlap might not have died in vain. ☺