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# Avsec Challenges: six of the best



by Philip Baum

I'm often asked my opinion as to the world's safest airport, securest airline or most effective screening technology. My answers are traditionally vague and, I'd be the first to admit, the opinions are of little value. After all, the world's most sophisticated security regimes often protect the airports and airlines where the threat is greatest. For example, Israel's Ben Gurion Airport and El Al Airlines are often cited by the media as being the prime examples of security excellence, yet it would be easy to argue that Greenland's Kangerlussuaq Airport, when considering the threat, is considerably more secure.

There are a myriad of examples of ineffective security systems within the aviation industry. That said, there is no world's worst airport. There is no airport I will not travel to on security grounds alone. My travel agent knows that I will fly any carrier, except Air France, and transit any airport, except French ones! It's not that I'm anti-French (they have wonderful cheeses!) or that my concerns over their approach to aviation security is questionable (which it is), but rather that I'd rather avoid being delayed due to industrial action by French pilots, French baggage handlers, French air traffic controllers or other French transportation workers, all of whom seem to take it in turn to be taking industrial action.

However, in these days of league tables, top tens, plays of the day and listings of the biggest, wildest, sexiest, most unforgettable or scariest, perhaps it is time we drew up our own aviation security chart? Accordingly, I've drawn up my "Six of the Best"...otherwise called the most pressing.

Such ventures are controversial. I very much doubt that any reader would totally agree with my prioritising of challenges. I'm sure at least one regulator (probably British or American!) will write in to explain that I've disregarded the impressive studies they have carried out on a given topic. But my point is to make sure, agree or not, that we address the loopholes

in the system. League tables, by encouraging debate, do have the merit of focussing our attention on priorities.

## 1. Unqualified Personnel

Whilst some states have made strenuous efforts in enhancing screener performance, the reality is that we are still deploying under-qualified, under-motivated, under-paid, under-supervised personnel.

The calibre of staff employed by customs and immigration authorities around the world is of a noticeably higher quality than those implementing aviation security procedures. Frighteningly, the other key difference between avsec personnel and the other border security operatives, is that the poor relations are effecting security controls before we board aircraft, whilst our more respected cousins find people carrying out illegal acts on a daily basis, after they have landed.

## 2. Reactive Security

The cartoonists seem to have grasped the reality of our approach to security quicker than those responsible for its design. Whilst we started asking people to remove their shoes for screening after Richard Reid's failed escapade, newspaper articles were illustrated by images of passengers questioning whether their underpants would be searched next. Amusing, unless, of course, you had relatives or friends aboard one of the Russian airlines destroyed by Chechen female suicide bombers last August who may well have carried their weapons of destruction underneath their clothing.

We know the extent of our exposure on the cargo side of our business. What have we done about it? We're looking at the technologies. We are devising programmes. We're considering our options. The truth is, we are waiting to be hit. Then, and only then, will there be a wholesale introduction of security technologies to address our vulnerability. The technologies do exist. They

are just deemed too expensive at present.

## 3. Civil Liberties

The media is awash with stories of our basic freedoms being eroded by questionable security practices. Profiling is pooh-pooed as being racially driven. Body searches have been the subject of much debate in recent months. Whether or not we can reasonably "touch" a passenger's breast has provided many a column inch in the press. Some of the most technologically advanced screening solutions, such as passenger X-ray and millimetre wave imaging, which offer the most promising detection capabilities on the market, are belittled by those who have lost sight of the most important civil liberty due passengers - that they reach their destination safely.

Amazingly, the same civil liberties debate is much more muted when it comes to immigration and customs controls. Both use profiling techniques, racial ones at that. Both find illicit goods, both find inadmissible passengers, and both use screening technologies as a secondary measure, rather than as the primary method.

## 4. Finance

There has been vast global expenditure on aviation security and it is very difficult to know where to draw the line. Cynics would argue that we can afford the odd disaster, à la Lockerbie, every decade or so and that to pour billions more into a bottomless pit would be a waste, let alone no guarantee of security.

On the other hand, we need to recognise that solutions to counter most threats do already exist. Explosive detection portals have been around for many years, but the fact that each one costs in excess of \$100,000 more than an archway metal detector has certainly impacted on their deployment rate. Cargo screening solutions, such as shake 'n bake, PFNA and stoichiometry, have been tried and tested...but not purchased.

Money has been available for some

## 'We are confiscating items that pose a miniscule threat when compared with the danger posed by a broken duty free bottle...'

initiatives, such as the reinforced cockpit door. That said, how much more secure would we be if that money had been spent on crew training? Given that aircrew are there for our safety and security, the amount of security training most receive is a disgrace to the industry.

### 5. Stupid Rules

On the first anniversary of the 11 September attacks, there was reconsideration of some of the "stupid rules" that had been put in place. More than two years on, many a stupid rule remains on the statute books.

I'd willingly sign a petition to reintroduce metal cutlery for in-flight meals, to allow passengers to carry their penknives on board, and to screen laptops inside their cases. We have screeners looking for all the wrong things, setting themselves up for failure as passengers tell tales of the things they have carried on board "without being detected". We are confiscating items that pose a miniscule threat when compared with the danger posed by a broken duty free bottle...or shoelace for that matter. And we are slowing the screening process down and, in some locations, creating a more attractive target for the suicide bomber within the airport terminal.

### 6. Questionable Standards

It's all very well complying with industry standards, but are the standards stringent enough? The famous Annex 17 to the Chicago Convention, albeit recently updated, can only ever be the lowest common denominator of security standards. There is little point having an international regulation unless it is both doable (by the poorest of member States) and enforceable.

How often are States blacklisted by the international aviation community for their failures to comply with the most basic of aviation security requirements? We'll leave that as a rhetorical question as the answer is too depressing! Audits are effected and an impressive programme, initiated by ICAO, is now underway. However, a true audit, that is designed to assess the actual security standards in place, should be covert. There is limited value in announcing that an audit will take place and giving an airport authority time to prepare. Fortunately, many States do audit themselves using their own inspectors. Unfortunately, it's a practice only carried out

by those States who already have impressive security systems; those that need it most do it least...

The last few weeks have given us an opportunity to ruminate over a few of the significant attacks that preceded 11 September 2001. The Air India trial in Vancouver (regardless of the verdict), the death of Uli Derickson (the heroic flight attendant aboard TWA 847) and the sentencing of Yuji Nishizawa (the All

Nippon Airways hijacker who killed a pilot in his attempt to use a live B-747 as a substitute for a computer game) have all served to remind us of the vulnerability of our industry to attacks by saboteurs, terrorist hijackers and the psychologically disturbed.

Many challenges that faced us at the time of such incidents have yet to be addressed. Is it not time to tackle the fundamentals of aviation security? If not, we deserve six of the best...

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