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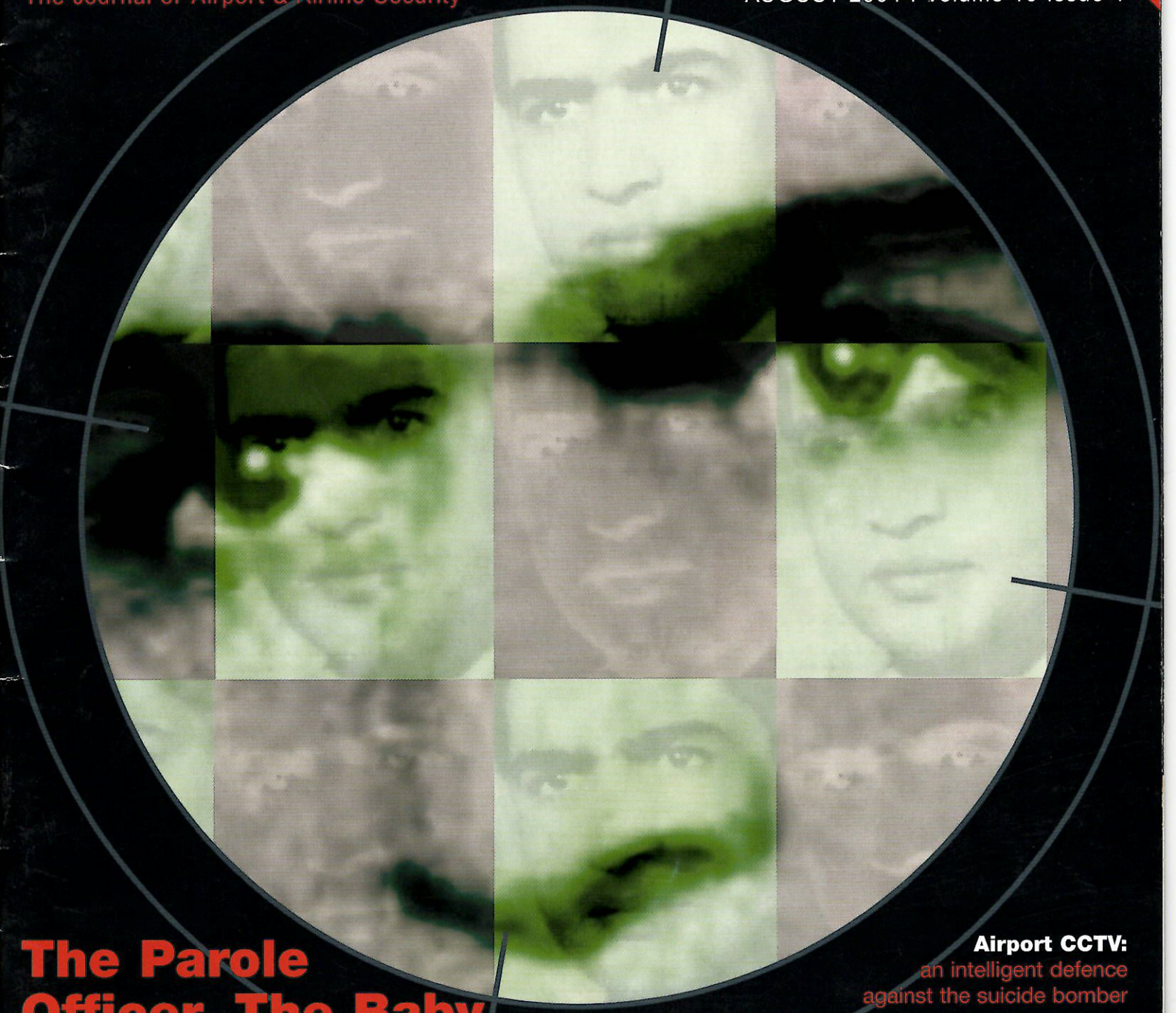
See inside for details on ICAO's AVSEC Seminar in Mexico



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A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

On 22 July 2004, just shy of three years since 19 hijackers and their masterminds transformed aviation forever, the 9-11 Commission (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States) published its final report. The world was presented with a 585-page document detailing the tragic events of 11 September 2001 itself and those of the days, weeks, months and years preceding it that culminated in one of the greatest atrocities ever committed on planet earth.

The Commission's final product was the culmination of their having "reviewed more than 2.5 million pages of documents and interviewed more than 1,200 individuals in ten countries. This included nearly every senior official from the current and previous administrations who had responsibility for topics covered in our mandate." They "held 19 days of hearings and took public testimony from 160 witnesses."

Most of the report focuses on the handling, or rather mishandling, of intelligence rather than on aviation security practices. In fact one of the most important lessons we can learn from the report is that intelligence, properly communicated, is our best defence against any future attack. The procedures we implement at airports and on airlines will never, alone, be a match for terrorist extravaganzas of the al-Qaeda ilk.

The report clearly summarised the enemy's mindset: "We learned about an enemy who is sophisticated, patient, disciplined, and lethal. The enemy rallies broad support in the Arab and Muslim world by demanding redress of political grievances, but its hostility toward us and our values is limitless. Its purpose is to rid the world of religious and political pluralism, the plebiscite, and equal rights for women. It makes no distinction between military and civilian targets. Collateral damage is not in its lexicon."

Well before 2001, aviation security professionals around the globe (and, I'm sure, many American ones too) mocked the belief, frequently expressed by those charged with safeguarding American skies, that the threat was lower domestically and that different security standards were therefore justified. The double-standard approach, exemplified by the presence of the then FAA inspection teams monitoring security standards at European airports that were, and continue to be, light years ahead of their American counterparts, meant an attack in the USA was inevitable.

The report summarises the cavalier attitude towards aviation security prevalent in the United States at the time. "We learned that the institutions charged with protecting our borders, civil aviation, and national security did not understand how grave this threat could be, and did not adjust their policies, plans, and practices to deter or defeat it."

The full report (as opposed to the Executive Summary) commences with a chilling analysis of what actually happened at the check-in counters, screening points and on board each of the four flights successfully hijacked that day, which is perhaps the section of greatest interest to the aviation security community.

The Executive Summary puts it succinctly: "The day began with the 19 hijackers getting through a security checkpoint system that they had evidently analysed and knew how to defeat. Their success rate in penetrating the system was 19 for 19.They took over the four flights, taking advantage of air crews and cockpits that were not prepared for the contingency of a suicide hijacking." Are aircrew realistically any better equipped today?

In the full report, the CAPPS system (Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System) then in place is exposed as an approach, focused solely on the processing of the "suspect's" checked baggage, devoid of any security sense. In Portland, Atta (the lead hijacker) was selected by, "CAPPS, created to identify passengers who should be subject to special security measures. Under security rules in place at the time, the only consequence of Atta's selection by CAPPS was that his checked bags were held off the plane until it was confirmed that he had boarded the aircraft." Of course, prior to 911, all the focus was on stopping another Lockerbie.

The value of requiring check-in staff to question passengers about their baggage according to a cribsheet undermines the intended opportunity for the questioner to evaluate the passenger from a security perspective. "A couple of Shehi's colleagues were obviously unused to travel; according to the United ticket agent, they had trouble understanding the standard security questions, and she had to go over them slowly until they gave the routine, reassuring answers." Routine is never reassuring.

The naivety of the passenger screening process is revealed, with particular reference to metal detection standards. "Each of the hijackers would have been screened by a walk-through metal detector calibrated to detect items with at least the metal content of a .22-caliber handgun. Anyone who might have set off that detector would have been screened with a hand wand - a procedure requiring the screener to identify the metal item or items that caused the alarm."

Perhaps the greatest failings are identified in the Dulles screening process where a combination of blunders enabled the Pentagon hijackers to succeed in their mission: "Hani Hanjour, Khalid al Mihdhar, and Majed Moqed were flagged by CAPPS. The Hazmi brothers were also selected for extra scrutiny by the airline's customer service representative at the check-in counter. He did so because one of the brothers did not have photo identification nor could he

understand English, and because the agent found both of the passengers to be suspicious. The only consequence of their selection was that their checked bags were held off the plane until it was confirmed that they had boarded the aircraft."

In the Dulles CCTV footage of the screening checkpoint, released to the mass media a day before the 911 final report was issued, eerie images of hijackers in motion are seen; images that will haunt victims families and friends for many years to come. The report summarises that, "Mihdhar and Moqed placed their carry-on bags on the belt of the X-ray machine and proceeded through the first metal detector. Both set off the alarm, and they were directed to a second metal detector. Mihdhar did not trigger the alarm and was permitted through the checkpoint. After Moqed set it off, a screener wanded him. He passed this inspection. Nawaf al Hazmi set off the alarms for both the first and second metal detectors and was then hand-wanded before being passed. In addition, his over-the-shoulder carry-on bag was swiped by an explosive trace detector and then passed. The video footage indicates that he was carrying an unidentified item in his back pocket, clipped to its rim."

The Commission asked "a screening expert to review the videotape of the hand-wanding, and he found the quality of the screener's work to have been "marginal at best." The screener should have "resolved" what set off the alarm; and in the case of both Moqed and Hazmi, it was clear that he did not."

If the description of what actually happened on board each aircraft had been submitted as a plot for a novel, any prospective publisher would have ridiculed the author for having an overactive imagination. But the horror story was reality. A reality made feasible, once intelligence and traditional screening techniques had failed, by the absence of sky marshals.

In the midst of the report we find a section referring to Atta's preparation for the hijack phase of the incident: Atta said they, "had encountered no problems carrying box cutters on cross-country surveillance flights. The best time to storm the cockpit would be about 10–15 minutes after takeoff, when the cockpit doors typically were opened for the first time. Atta did not believe they would need any other weapons. He had no firm contingency plan in case the cockpit door was locked. While he mentioned general ideas such as using a hostage or claiming to have a bomb, he was confident the cockpit doors would be opened and did not consider breaking them down a viable idea." A sobering thought. Since then we have installed reinforced cockpit doors, but how frequently are they opened?

Whilst the report makes welcome suggestions regarding the enhancement of security, perhaps the most fundamental lesson we can learn is the need to be proactive. "The most important failure was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat. The terrorist danger from Bin Ladin and al Qaeda was not a major topic for policy debate among the public, the media, or in the Congress." When I look at the measures we have put in place since that fateful day, I have to question whether we are any more imaginative today than we were on 10 September 2001...