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• GRL781

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• BA074

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## **Hijacking's Back in Vogue** 2002 in review

**Muting on the Bounty:**  
maritime security post 9/11

**Airport Architecture:**  
back to the drawing board

**Russia's 911:**  
suicidal terrorism Chechen style

**Upgrading Airport Security:**  
a German proposal for a global initiative

**Aviation Security Industry Awards 2002**

• RK595

## Hijacking's Back in Vogue: 2002 in Review

by Philip Baum

One might have thought that there would be a sharp decrease in the number of hijacks in the aftermath of September 11th. After all, who would be so foolish as to attempt such an act when passengers and crew are watching each others every move and are ready to launch themselves physically at any person who goes anywhere near the cockpit?

The reality is somewhat different as incident after incident demonstrates. Sure we could have a semantic debate as to the meaning of the word "hijack" and many will be keen to argue that certain 'happenings' were not hijacks but rather in-flight disturbances. But whatever you chose to call them, the outcome of each could have been catastrophic and therefore warrant our serious consideration.

The perpetrators have been terrorists, working as a group, such as the highly trained ELN rebels who hijacked an Aires Airlines Dash-8 in Colombia in February. Four men forced the pilot to fly the aircraft to the town of Hobos and land it on a road. Some of the passengers were left waiting on the roadside as if waiting for a bus. The aim of the action was the kidnapping of Colombian Senator Jorge Gechem. The hijackers were met at the landing site by comrades who managed to whisk them away to safety - and their prize to captivity. Similar, in many respects to the hijacking on April 12 1999, but when all the passengers and crew on an Avianca flight had suffered the same fate - all of them being taken to the farthest reaches of the Colombian jungle. Some were held there for 19 months, one of the longest hijacks on record, but granted the world media's preference to cover stories pertaining to Europe and the United States, the incident com-

manded little international publicity.

Some terrorists have preferred to work solo, such as Richard Reid when he attempted, in vain, to blow up American Airlines flight 63 last December 22. As Christmas approaches, our guard needs to be extra vigilant as terrorist groups have often utilised the extra oxygen of publicity afforded them at this time of the year when other news is lacking. Lockerbie was December 21, Air France to Marseilles was December 24, Indian Airlines to Qandahar was December 24, the Rome and Vienna airport attacks were December 27... Add to the absence of real news, the increased passenger loads (in the West at least), the high spirits of many of the security screeners and the wide range of presents being transported that tax many an X-ray operators image interpretation skills, and one can see why terrorists may wish to operate during the season of goodwill to all men.

Whether he could be classified as a terrorist is a moot point, but when Tawfiq Fukra attempted to hijack an EL AL flight operating from Tel Aviv to Istanbul on November 17, he clearly demonstrated that he was sympathetic to the Al Qaeda cause, even, purportedly, with plans to fly the aircraft into a Tel Aviv skyscraper. I say moot point, as I think that even the most extreme optimist should have been exceptionally sceptical about successfully hijacking an airline known to have sky marshals and reinforced cockpit doors, single-handed armed only with a pen knife. Many were quick to use the case as a weapon against profiling. After all, wasn't the Israeli system supposed to prevent such passengers boarding in the first place? I would rather view it as an example of why the Israelis use a

multi-layered approach to security and do not rely 100% on any aspect of their system. It would be better to use the case as yet another example as to why the deployment of sky marshals is necessary. And for the gun-toting pilots amongst you (or advocates thereof), I must say that I wonder whether Mr. Fukra would have lived to stand trial. Sky marshals are trained to use their weapons only as a last resort.

Fukra's desire to copy Atta and Co's actions was not unique. The schoolboy, Charles Bishop, succeeded in crashing a light aircraft into a bank in Tampa in January and the investigation into the crash into the Pirelli building in Milan is still ongoing.

And the Fukra case is not the only example of the value of having sky marshals, or at the very minimum flight attendants trained in self-defence, on board. In June two men hijacked an Ethiopian Airlines Fokker-50 operating on a domestic route (so often the case). Gruesome pictures of them, dead in the aisle, soon hit the internet, armed security guards having managed to shoot them.

The heroic actions of a flight attendant, who had undergone self-defence training, ensured that the Indian passenger who attempted to hijack an Air Seychelles flight in September failed. As the aircraft approached Male in the Maldives, the man swung into action armed with an 8-inch knife and claiming to have a bomb. It was a lone female flight attendant that managed to wrestle him to the ground and her fellow crew members that assisted in restraining him in a seat.

And, in August an ethnic Albanian, being deported from Germany to Kosovo, attempted to hijack a Montenegro Airlines flight by using his shoelaces to strangle a flight

attendant. In-flight security again saved the day... So too when a man on board a Mahan Air flight in Iran, drenched in a flammable liquid, threatened to detonate two improvised explosive devices strapped to his waist. He too was overpowered. Mahan Air was the "victim" again in October, and armed security guards again the saviours.

Other hijacks have also been resolved in the air. An armed passenger was overpowered on a Saudia flight operating from Khartoum in Sudan in October and it was the passengers who managed to restrain a man who attempted to break into the cockpit of a Czech Airlines flight in January.

The effectiveness of ground assault has also been proven this year. An Avianca flight was stormed in Madrid in July when a drunkard effectively hijacked (although most people seem keen to classify this as a disruptive passenger incident) it en route from Colombia. And, in China, in April, armed police stormed a China Northern flight when it landed in Liaoning under hijacker control.

The most frightening aspect of the resurgence in the number of incidents is that our enemy has gone low-tech whilst we have gone hi-tech. In other words those hijackers who have boarded flights at airports where security screening processes are respected have chosen to utilise weapons not easily identifiable by the sophisticated technology we have.

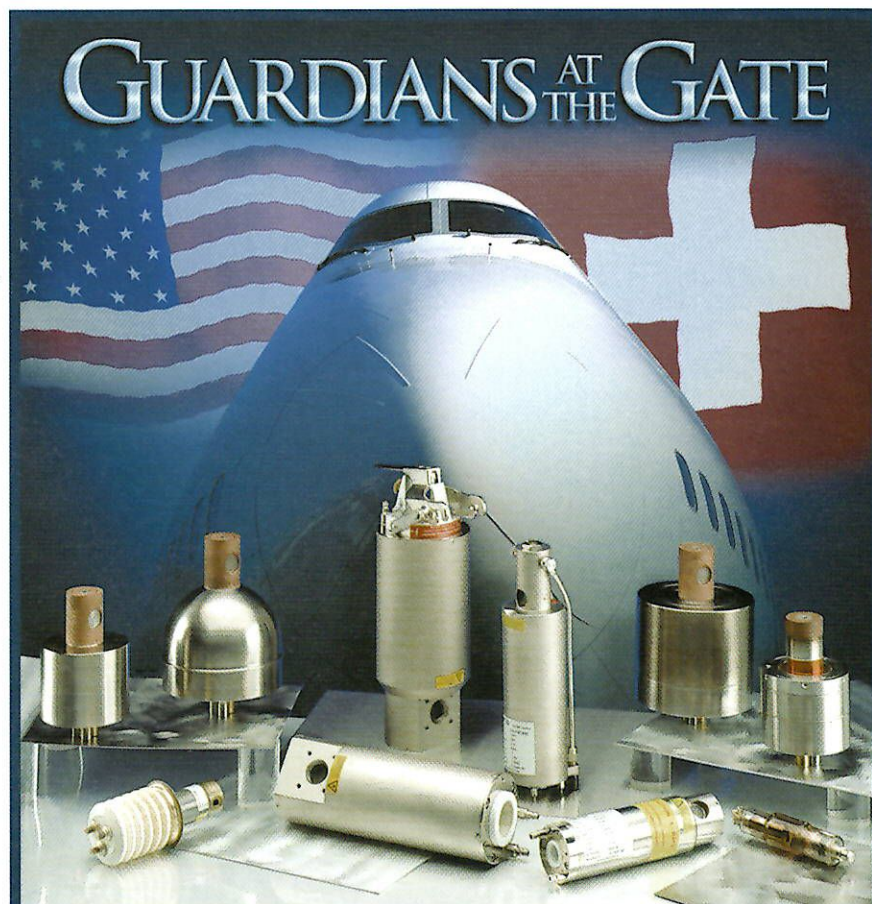
The industry has done much this year to promote the concept of a sealed cockpit but has a long way to go before establishing what the ideal solution will actually look like. Enhanced security has little value if it creates safety deficiency.

But the case for the sky marshal is strong and whilst we would all favour a system that prevents hijackers boarding in the first place, a last line of defence is essential too. We must not allow ourselves to view the cockpit as the only sensitive part of an aircraft and that the reinforced cockpit door be the only measure required in flight. In Brazil, on November 12, a 56-year old passenger, Clodoveu Dantas Lacerda, with a pension grievance poured gasoline through the aisles of an aircraft operating a domestic route. Had he ignited it, the value of a cockpit door would have been zero...

Self defence classes are indeed the flavour of the year, but the industry must take steps to regulate the techniques being taught. Jackie Chan's school of martial arts, with high kicks down the aisles may sound attractive, but it is foolish to believe that a petite flight attendant will be a match for a terrorist or suicidal individual granted two-hours classroom experience. Teamwork must be the order of the day.

So, as we approach another new year,

shocked at the number of incidents still being perpetrated in our skies, we must all make a resolution: to acknowledge the threat and meet it with a multi-level security system that starts with intelligence, utilises the latest screening technologies, empowers the screeners and equips the crew to combat a threat should all previous levels fail. What is in vogue, such as hijacking, goes out of fashion very quickly if it continues to fail. ☉



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