

• FI326

AVIATIONsecurity

international

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security



ASI Special Report
100% Baggage Screening:
the European challenge

Computer Based Training:
does it really work?

Into The 21st Century:
aviation security management

ID Cards:
preventing fraud

ISSN 1352-0148

FEBRUARY 2000
VOLUME 5 ISSUE 1

A Return To Aerial Arms?

by Philip Baum

Whilst the world readied itself for the millennium celebrations, few would have predicted that one of the two closing stories of the 20th Century would have concerned a terrorist airline hijack. After all, were they not just a 1960's and 1970's phenomena?

The intelligence agencies, the security analysts and avsec trainers, let alone the pages of this journal, have long been preaching otherwise. The demise of some of the European and Palestinian terror groups may have altered both the pattern and the arena, yet the threat still remains.

Indeed, it was in the December issue of ASI that Professor Paul Wilkinson wrote that "hijackings have...been of proven value to terrorist groups in extorting major concessions from governments, such as...the release of terrorist prisoners from gaol". He further warned that "in the light of the bitter ethnic religious, and political/ideological conflicts being waged in so many parts of the world...efficient, well-designed and effectively managed aviation security is going to be...vital".

“ hijacking is a modern day threat, not some historical fad ”

Indian Airlines flight IC 814 was hijacked forty minutes after it took off from Katmandu, Nepal for New Delhi, on December 24 1999. As has happened so often in the past, the Christmas shut-down in the western world afforded the terrorist hijackers all the publicity they desired. The media, starved of real news, had a story to focus on. The tragedy unfolding in Chechnya had already become a stale story and even concerns about the millennium bug were already being perceived as exag-

gerated. And Boris Yeltsin's resignation on New Year's Eve simply averted the general public's attention from the release scenes.

Airline crews are taught that most hijackings, today, are perpetrated by asylum seekers who have no wish to cause death or injury and who simply wish to get to their preferred destination; release of the hostages will usually take place within 24 hours. The crew aboard the Indian Airlines flight might, just for a moment, have hoped that that was to be their destiny too. Yet, within minutes it became apparent that these five hijackers were extremists with a clear political agenda – the release of 35 Kashmiri militants held in Indian gaols, the exhumed body of a rebel leader and \$200 million ransom for the hostages. This hijacking was one that, in training classes, would be referred to as "worst case scenario".

The hijackers were professionals. In the early stages of the hijack they kept the plane moving. On board, they ruled with an iron fist. One passenger, Rippan Katyal, who was returning from his honeymoon in Nepal with his bride, was killed for failing to obey the terrorists' commands. Eventually, the plane came to its final stop, the Afghan city of Kandahar. The area was under the control of the Taleban who managed to keep the situation under control by warning the hijackers that the execution of further hostages would result in their assault on the aircraft. That said, the hijackers knew that the Taleban were not about to allow another country's commando unit to enter the fray.

Ultimately, the hijackers got their way. Whilst the Indian negotiators managed to reduce the demands to the release of just three Kashmiri militants, it would not be cynical to suggest that that had been the original aim of the hijackers. They had their prize – the

release of Maulana Masood Azhar, a Pakistani Muslim cleric supportive of Kashmiri independence from Indian rule.

In analysing the incident, many lessons will be learned. From negotiating tactics to crew performance under stress and from airport security procedures to the management of a hijack by the airline and the authorities concerned. Most of those lessons are not for the public domain. What is, however, is the warning.

“ copycat hijackings are more than likely ”

Hijacking is a modern day threat, not some historical fad. Our concern about the terrorist bomb, in the post-Lockerbie era, should not be allowed to divert our attention from the more traditional criminal act against civil aviation.

The Indian Airlines hijack will be regarded, by many, as a success for the perpetrators. Consequently, copycat hijackings are more than likely. We pride ourselves as being part of the global aviation community, yet, in reality, our perspective is somewhat insular. Our friends and families live in an age where they can travel the world; we, meanwhile, have confidence in the technologies that exist to counter the threat posed. Yet whilst we are countering the threat in London, New York, Sydney, Singapore and many other cities around this globe, we tend to lose sight of the centres of conflict. We must maintain our guard at home, but we must also ensure that some of that community spirit we all proclaim at international conferences is translated into security measures on the ground, where the risk is highest. My fear is that, as the clock struck midnight and heralded the new millennium, plans were already in the making for a return to aerial arms...