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Verdict At Camp Zeist

by Philip Baum

Once a verdict is passed, the tension is supposed to ease. The situation is clarified, and for the onlookers, if not for the protagonists themselves, they can believe that justice has been served.

On January 31st 2001, in a courtroom in Camp Zeist, on what is normally considered Dutch soil (yet, for the purposes of this trial, was determined to be Scottish territory), Lord Sutherland issued judgement in the case against Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah.

More than twelve years after Pan Am flight 103 was brought down by a terrorist bomb, a man was held responsible and sentenced to a minimum term of twenty years imprisonment. Another was freed.

Whilst the verdict has provided the families of the victims with some satisfaction that at least one person will serve time, though arguably not enough, for the murder of their loved ones, they are equally well aware that even if al-Megrahi did play an active role in the perpetration of the crime, he was not the orchestrator. Despite Libya's desire that the rest of the world commit Lockerbie to the annals of history, the brains behind the act remain free.

It seems that after a trial costing more than £60 million to stage, we have not moved that far forward in real terms, albeit that everybody can salvage something from it.

Britain is seen to have imprisoned a terrorist. The police enquiry has proven its value. It's hard for either side to argue against the justice system being fair when one man is found guilty and the other freed. Al-Megrahi may find some solace in the brevity of his sentence. Fhimah can rejoin his family. Qaddafi can argue that, by dropping the charges of conspiracy against the accused, the Scottish prosecutors had all but admitted that Libya, as a State, played no role in the attack. The families of those murdered can feel that their

quest for justice is showing signs of progress.

Whilst I would not for a moment attempt to dilute the importance of the trial, I do feel that the most important factor in relation to Lockerbie is being overlooked - our willingness to accept its lessons. Whilst the families can, and should, concentrate on the search for justice, governments also need to ensure that such acts do not happen again. We focus on Lockerbie, perhaps excessively, as a result of an international media driven by the United Kingdom and the United States. What about Avianca and UTA, two flights also destroyed by terrorist bombs the year after Lockerbie? It's the preventative measures taken that are the solution and, more importantly, the people that carry them out.

Whilst advances have been made, we've ended up in a catchphrase society where terms such as '100% hold baggage screening' and 'positive passenger bag match' are taken to be the 'be all and end all' of aviation security. Of course such measures are vital, but where is the headway in respect of the screeners? Where is the motivation for them to save lives?

Nurses receive a salary but can go home believing that they may have made a fellow human being more comfortable or contributed to saving a life. Teachers can savour the achievements of the young and feel that another individual is better placed to contribute to tomorrow's world. And soldiers can take pride in the uniform they wear and the nation they serve.

How can we really look the families of victims of terror in the face when we know that many of the world's front line aviation security screeners and guards, are in the industry for the sake of having a job and receiving the associated, however paltry, salary? Some may get a buzz out of working in an airport environment, but few are generally motivated by a desire to save lives.

Security contracts, where the norm, are awarded to the cheapest bidder, often staffed by people who have failed to get jobs elsewhere. I know there are exceptions. I, myself, started my aviation security career as a screener and have made it my professional goal to contribute in some way to increasing standards that will save lives.

Genuinely motivated people are the exception, and we can't, fortunately, even entice staff by rewarding real success of lives saved. Whilst customs officers will encounter passengers illegally importing or exporting goods and the immigration officer will find inadmissible passengers, the security guard is probably not going to find himself confronting a hijacker or bomber.

Reality is that customs and immigration officials are respected. They represent the State and are seen to provide a valuable service. Can we say the same for our aviation security personnel?

Who are the security managers of today? Are they the screeners of previous years? Rarely. Most are professionals brought in from either the armed forces or other airline or airport departments. So, yes we are professionally managed, but are the real security procedures effected by professionals? Again, rarely.

The lessons of Lockerbie, and other similar tragedies, are clear. We face a very real threat, and the response to that threat may be partly deterrent but it must not be cosmetic. We need to turn aviation security into a profession, with motivated individuals who can see a clear path for advancement and who are financially rewarded to a level commensurate with the tragedies they prevent.

Regardless as to the Camp Zeist verdict, we must still ensure that justice is truly served. Hunt down the real perpetrators of Lockerbie for sure, but equally, justice means avoiding charade-playing and proactively preventing the repetition of such barbaric acts.

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