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Adding Common Sense to Security

by Philip Baum

I am somewhat sceptical about Richard Reid's desire to die on 22 December. Had he really wanted to detonate the explosive charges contained in his shoes, I doubt that, granted the extensive planning undertaken, he would have struggled to light the fuse in full view of his fellow passengers and crew.

Even if he were not an Al Qa'eda activist, Reid was sympathetic to the cause, and his actions managed to scare far more than those who witnessed the act close up. One could argue that his "failure" was actually a wholehearted "success".

Reid managed then, as others will in the future, to highlight both the loopholes of our security system and our inability to respond appropriately.

The terrorist holds the cards. The terrorist is the dealer. And, to use a bridge analogy, we remain the dummy.

We continue to react to terrorists' specific actions rather than look at the bigger picture. Furthermore, we implement strategies in the aftermath of each incident, which the general public will understand, expect and appreciate, rather than formulate a long-term programme to cater for every eventuality.

So, when Richard Reid walks onto a plane with explosives in his shoes, screening checkpoints suddenly start asking people to remove their shoes so they can be X-rayed. Had we not known about the possibility of a shoe-bomber earlier? Of course we had. And, to paint the policy in even gloomier colours, it was a procedure only implemented for a few days. Why? Had the

threat dissipated? Of course not.

Whilst the terrorist succeeds in exposing a security flaw in the system, we then expose our own lack of faith in our system.

And what happens next time? When a passenger hijacks a plane using a wire concealed in the beading of a bag, are we going to ban all hand baggage? When a hijacker manages to take a weapon on board as an internal carry, Papillion-style, are we going to X-ray all passengers? And, the next time a passenger picks up a bot-

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tle from a trolley on board and attacks a crew member, will we then decide that no wine should be served?

Or, will we use our common sense?

Whilst taking into account all new developments, any government that has any faith in the security it affords passengers travelling in and out of its airports should feel confident enough to maintain its existing procedures. To do otherwise sends out the wrong message, especially if it's "business as normal" a few days later.

Switzerland is an excellent example of this. Whilst the media were asking incredulously whether "it is really true that the Swiss allow passengers on board with penknives", there were those of us applauding Switzerland's realistic response, whilst decrying those intent on

preventing not only penknives, but even nail clippers from being taken into the aircraft cabin.

Even worse than the procedure to confiscate such items, and of far greater concern than the distress it may cause the law-abiding passenger who is suddenly perceived as the carrier of an offensive weapon, is the fact that such procedures needlessly distract the attention of the screeners from the very people they should be concentrating on.

I, like many others, in the pages of this journal and elsewhere, have moaned about such issues publicly. Many of those charged with the real responsibility of securing the world's airlines and airports do so privately. Then there are those who consider change too arduous and who just pray the needle is not in their haystack.

Sometimes we need to change even the most ingrained approaches to problem solving. Permit me to use my wife, in her professional capacity as a numeracy consultant, as an example...

There is a new approach to the teaching of mathematics in the United Kingdom. I was taught that if you, as a 7-year old, wanted to add 24 and 33, you would add the 4 (of the 24) and the 3 (of the 33) first, making 7, and then add the 2 and the

3, making 5. The answer being 57. The question remains, however, whether or not the 7-year old understands what he or she has done? Really one should add the tens first, I'm told, and then the units.

It's the same with multiplication. To multiply 25 by 7, I would multiply 5 by 7, write down 5 and carry 3. Then multiply 2 by 7 and add the 3, making 17. The answer, of course, is then 175. But, did I understand my workings? No, it was just a process that gave me the right answer. The child of today is taught to look at the numbers, appreciate that there are four 25s in 100, therefore eight in 200, so the answer must be 200 less 25.....

What, you may well ask, is the connection between mental mathematics at primary level with aviation security? The answer lies in the vital importance of our understanding the processes we implement to tackle problems and our willingness to change to better practices.

To respond to the threat the aviation industry faces in the 21st Century we need to cast away some of the 20th Century

practices. They are, regrettably, outdated. And, in the same way that I am reluctant to leave my mathematical comfort-zone even when teaching my own children, perhaps those that determine the aviation security policies today might also be prepared to spread their wings a little.

Six months ago nobody took seriously

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the threat of suicidal terrorists hijacking four aircraft on a single day and flying them into population centres. Two months ago they did not take the threat of a passenger secreting explosives in his shoes seriously. And, one month ago, many would have laughed at the thought of a schoolboy stealing a light aircraft and setting out on his own suicide mission.

We don't know the modus operandi of the terrorist any more. We are up against a highly sophisticated, intelligent opponent. It's an opponent who may utilise tried and trusted methods, but who may just as well re-write the textbook.

We can respond to the former approach if we choose, or we can try to respond to

both. To do so means first understanding the problem and, just like the mathematics problem, knowing that the answer we arrive at is appropriate to the problem posed.

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