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100% HBS: 99% charade? *by Philip Baum*

It's January 2003. All airports in ECAC member states are supposed to be screening every item of checked luggage being loaded onto departing aircraft. And, granted much less notice to implement such a process, the same is supposed to be true in the United States. The majority of airports, both sides of the Atlantic, have achieved this goal. Those that have not are set to do so in the near future.

Phew, now we can relax when we board an aircraft secure in the knowledge that no terrorist could have infiltrated an explosive device into the hold!

100% hold baggage screening is being portrayed as the silver bullet that solves all our aviation security woes. It is the kingpin of any security infrastructure. It does, now automated, cater for fallibility of the human operator.

What utter nonsense! In reality the process is a phenomenally expensive, backward looking solution to only one method of attacking civil aviation. Don't get me wrong. Before you brand me a heretic, I assure you that I am pleased that baggage screening is a piece of our aviation security jigsaw puzzle. It's the emphasis I have a problem with. It is the ranking of the measure within the aviation security hierarchy that gives me greatest cause for concern.

The media hype that surrounded the January 1st implementation date made me realise just how gullible we are. It was as if we had been lucky to reach the deadline without another bombing; as if we'd had a narrow escape.

The concept was really born in the United Kingdom; that said, (as you will see in the article on German technology) Heimann had supplied X-ray equipment to Yugoslavia back in 1970 in order that all checked baggage could be screened even at that early date. Europe, in the aftermath of the Lockerbie tragedy of 1988, recognised the need for a solution to the threat posed by the terrorist bomber. As a result,

ECAC member states, following Britain's lead, set deadlines that were achievable and carefully researched how solutions could be efficiently integrated into the baggage handling systems of each airport.

America, on the other hand, opted for the same deadline as a panic reaction to the September 11 atrocities, even though such screening would not have averted the disasters occurring.

In the pages of this journal I have often expounded on our mistaken over-emphasis on technology and disregard of human factors and that is not my intention here. Nor do I really want to hammer away at our back-to-front approach to baggage screening, where the best detection technologies are deployed to inspect bags that are rejected by less-sophisticated technologies. In other words, when a bag is passed at first examination it is then loaded onto the aircraft, without offering the "clever kit" the opportunity to ever identify the bomb contained therein. This issue too we have addressed in issues on the limitations of X-ray.

The question is rather why we pay so much attention to baggage screening. Time and time again, we have had to learn that whatever steps we take to prevent unlawful attacks being perpetrated against our carriers, and the passengers and crew that fly therein, that time and time again those who wish to perpetrate such attacks will employ means to circumvent the measures taken.

As many a sensation-seeking journalist has demonstrated, our passenger screening checkpoints leave much to be desired. We utilise X-ray examination that may well successfully facilitate the discovery of weapons or grenades, let alone penknives and scissors, yet has limited value in the identification of explosives or small blades. Our passenger screening technology has huge limitations too. So why spend the multi-millions on going hi-tech on baggage

screening, let alone the associated costs of terminal and baggage make-up area redesign, and then go low-tech in passenger screening? Where are the deadlines there?

Two events in November demonstrated the extent of our exposure. Firstly, the hijacking of an Alitalia flight by a passenger known to be a threat to aviation – he'd hijacked another flight three years earlier! He showed how one could successfully hijack a flight, and gain access to the cockpit, by threatening to blow up an aircraft. Wouldn't most pilots take their chances and open their reinforced cockpit doors if faced with this dilemma? Secondly (and covered in greater detail in our lead story), the missile attack on the Arkia flight departing Mombasa. Should another such incident occur in the future, our failure to deploy infrared counter-measures will surely be questioned.

Again, I accept that there is a limit to the number of measures we can take and still have an aviation system that serves its intended purpose of transporting people and cargo from point to point in a cost-efficient, timely manner. But, I do take issue with our over dependence on one aspect of the security system and comparative dismissive attitude towards other equally exposed elements.

So, let's stop singing the praises of our questionable achievement in ensuring that bags are screened and wait until we know that we have been equally attentive to passenger screening, cargo screening, perimeter security and access control.

We remain woefully exposed in respect of cargo where we kid ourselves that "registered agents" and "known shipper" programmes are somehow security measures rather than bureaucratic procedures designed as an insurance policy. The technology does now exist to screen cargo consignments, but because cargo has yet to be the vehicle of the terrorist bomb we have not deployed it.

We have done very little to counter the threat posed by terrorist organisations willing to carry out chemical or biological attacks against aviation. The technology exists and it could be adapted for airport checkpoint operations, but because such a threat seems unthinkable and is only the subject of speculation, we have kept to traditional screening techniques.

Internal carries are usually associated with narco-smuggling, yet the technique could be just as well be utilised to carry a device or weapon onto an aircraft. Nobody, as far as we know, has done so yet, so governments have been loathe to deploy any passenger screening technology other than metal detectors.

In-flight security is hotly debated and sky marshal deployment derided despite their proven success in hijack prevention numerous times in the last twelve months alone. In China, this January alone, in-flight security succeeded in restraining hijackers in two separate incidents. Cost is often cited as the reason why such measures are not common place, yet, at the same time, we justify spending billions on screening baggage that

has prevented just how many bombings?

What we have done, in our rush to screen bags, is generate queues at terminal entrances, which become potential targets themselves, opening us up to other risks. I was absolutely horrified at recent Transportation Security Administration recommendations that passengers leave their checked baggage unlocked!

There are so many security reasons why this poorly considered advice should be reviewed. Not only are passengers going to either have items stolen (baggage handler theft being commonplace around the globe) or claim that they have had items stolen, but we are increasing the possibility of items being infiltrated into baggage. By recommending that people carry their valuable items in their hand baggage, the quantity of hand baggage going through checkpoints in the terminals is going to increase too. Queues will form, passenger tempers will be further stretched, the pressure on screeners will multiply and, don't forget, these valuables will now be screened by equipment not best suited

to explosive detection. Furthermore, as a security principle, no bag should ever be searched without the passenger present... especially if one has cause for concern.

We, within the industry, must remember that baggage screening is only part of the solution. Somehow we need to convey that message to the general public and those who wish us harm. Variety, it is said, is the spice of life. Nowhere is this more true than in security. Taking away the terrorist's opportunity to learn our processes is our best defence.

Hold baggage screening is not the problem. I have not used this editorial as a plea for profiling at screening's expense. Rather I am campaigning for existing solutions to be more widely deployed. The technology emanating from the R&D floors of the likes of L3, Rapiscan, Heimann and Yxlon is truly impressive, but we need to harness their achievements and set deadlines for product deployment in passenger and cargo screening too before we can even begin to give ourselves a collective pat on the back. If we fail to do so, then aviation security is, to put it bluntly, a charade. ☉

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