

# AVIATIONsecurity

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## US Federal Air Marshals:

an exclusive interview  
with Director Thomas Quinn

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our Achilles Heel?

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# THE CASE OF THE MISSING WELSH INSURANCE AGENT & OTHER STORIES

**O**sama bin Laden must be sitting there in his cave glowing with pride at his ability to create a climate of fear without even having to effect an attack on civil aviation.

The cancellation of flights, scheduled to operate to the United States, over the holiday season, a phenomena to be repeated as this issue was about to go to press, is of concern to all. Whilst intelligence information is fundamental to the prevention of the next terrorist atrocity, the way we utilise the information available is even more important as, in part, it demonstrates to the enemy our level of confidence and our response capability.

First of all it is important to note that I am not privy, nor should I be, to the exact nature of the intelligence information available to the authorities. Given that, I would be the last to second-guess their decision not to operate certain flights. If the threat intelligence is "credible", then there may be little alternative but to ground aircraft.

The implications of such preventative measures however do little to instil confidence in the aviation security regime.

The bizarre sequence of events and pronouncements began on Christmas Eve when Air France had to cancel six of its US-bound flights. A few days later the US authorities stated that they might require the deployment of sky marshals on "selected" flights operated by foreign carriers, causing hysteria in the media about the probable threat and condemnation from many overseas authorities and unions. Then, on New Year's Eve, an Aeromexico flight was cancelled from Mexico City to Los Angeles and British Airways passengers, on a flight out of Heathrow, found themselves being reversed-screened upon their arrival in Washington. For the next two days, the

same British Airways flight, the now infamous BA 223, was cancelled due to security concerns. So was a British Airways flight to Riyadh. Then a degree of normality returned to the industry, until 31 January when announcements were made that flights (British Airways, Air France and Continental) on 1 and 2 February were to be cancelled.

There is no doubt that there was specific intelligence concerning the flights in question. However, it would seem that the nature of the intelligence changed over the same period. Initially we were lead to believe that names that corresponded with those of terrorist watch-lists were booked onto the Air France flights on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It later turned out that those names actually related to a five-year old child, a Welsh insurance agent and an elderly Chinese restaurateur. The nature of watch-lists, especially given that many of the names on American lists will have been transliterated from Arabic, means the chances of mismatches are very high. So why cancel flights? And, surely, if we have any faith in our screening system at all, we must believe that, when a specific threat to a flight is known about, we will be able to identify the passenger on the ground? If we can't do it then, when can we do it?

The announcement that non-US registered carriers may be required to operate with sky marshals on board may have seemed like the world's only Super Power flexing its muscles again too readily. The saga reminded me of the days of the Hatch Amendment (when Senator Orrin Hatch proposed that all non-US carriers, operating the same routes as US carriers, be required to implement the same security procedures as the US carriers). The major differences between those days and now are firstly that the recent announcement was made on the basis of threat

information rather than attempts at creating an economic level playing field (under the guise of security enhancement) and secondly that we are now post-September 11th. Nobody can blame the American powers-that-be of acting upon intelligence that might indicate their cities are once again at risk from a civilian aircraft being turned into a weapon of mass destruction.

What is of interest in their use of the phrase "selected flights". In other words, by avoiding reference to "selected routes" (that would necessitate a sky marshal programme be in place permanently), it would be a decision based on intelligence information. Whilst I am strongly in favour of sky marshal deployment, if there is threat information in existence about a certain flight, there is no guarantee that a sky marshal will be able to prevent an atrocity taking place. Take for example the scenario of a suicidal terrorist, with an improvised explosive device implanted, inserted or ingested, who pulls the cord as the aircraft is on final approach to an airport, over a city centre. The effects of an explosion would, of course, be so much worse if the device were chemical, biological or radiological in nature...

If the threat information was such as to indicate a passenger be the instrument of destruction, once again we must believe we can identify the person before boarding by a combination of profiling techniques and technology. If the threat information were such as to indicate the possibility of a surface-to-air missile attack, then deploying sky marshals would only add to the number of fatalities. Flight cancellations would be the only option remaining.

Consternation about sky marshals needs careful analysis. If the concern is raised due to the lack of protocols, cross-training with aircrew and corporate policy, fair



enough. If, however, it is due to a belief that security measures need to be taken on the ground, and that we must identify threat passengers before boarding, then such consternation simply displays the naivety of those who believe that this is achievable all the time. It still amazes me that the difference between disaster and survival in so many incidents has been the cabin crew. Incidences of prevention on the ground have been few and far between despite the colossal sums of money thrown at new technology. Let's give these heroes of our industry some support.

The way in which flights were cancelled in the first few days of February differed from those a month earlier. This time announcements were made 24 to 48 hours ahead of time. By publicising such action, if names on watch-lists were the problem, then there was going to be little opportunity to seize them at the point of departure. If a chemical or biological attack were feared, once again we had no opportunity to identify the carrier. And, if cargo were the concern, then we could have just elected to operate the flights cargo-free. Given the routes in question, I doubt that surface-to-air missile attack was the issue, given that alternative flights could equally be targeted. The same would apply to intelligence indicating an inside-job, using airport-based employees. I suppose my greatest concern is that the authorities feared an attack using a weapon or device that our checkpoints are incapable of detecting.

Given that "the enemy" knows the nature of the threat, we have to ask ourselves what the flight cancellations tell them. That their communication channels are being monitored? Yes, but perhaps that's what they want...

So where do we go from here? Do we just accept that flights are cancelled on a regular basis? Do we allow ourselves to believe that these are the only routes at risk? How many more blows can the airline industry withstand?

I write this in a hotel room in Vancouver, having just listened to the latest news bulletin. Senator Edwards, campaigning to become the Democrats candidate for the US presidential elections later this year, found himself delayed at an airport due to

a penknife he had in his pocket. This man, travelling with an entourage that included security personnel, perhaps should have known better than to carry a knife, but the story is yet another example (many of which are in Air Watch) of how the security system has become an object of ridicule. Senator Edwards was never going to hijack a flight! Leave him alone and focus on the real threats...

I mention that incident, not to change tack, but rather to highlight how incompetent we appear to be in the eyes of the public and our aircrew. The very same public that is looking for reassurance that the flights they are booked on are being cancelled for a reason. The very same aircrew who have gathered in

Vancouver (at the International Cabin Safety Symposium) to express their security concerns and exasperation about the lack of information afforded them. Unlike the regulators, they have to fly; they put their lives on the line.

None of us have the luxury of knowing where the next Al Qa'eda attack will emanate from. It could be a surface-to-air missile; it could be a chemical or biological device loaded in cargo; it could be a pilot who has infiltrated an airline; it could be a suicide bomber with an internal carry; it could be a Chechen; it could be an Uzbekistani; and I say this in complete seriousness, there's no reason to believe that it could not be a Welsh insurance agent... ■

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