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Quality Control: a fear of failure

by Philip Baum



Fundamental to any security operation is the personnel deployed to enact the procedures and operate the equipment provided. One can have the best technology in the world at one's disposal, but unless it is accompanied by a highly trained, motivated and passionate workforce, our investment will have been in vain.

According to the Transportation Security Administration, across the United States an average of two firearms are found every day at airport screening checkpoints. Of course, the vast majority of these are being inadvertently carried by licensed individuals who have simply forgotten that they had left their gun in their carry-on baggage!

Equally, given the technology available and threat status, one would expect 100% detection rates of dense, metallic objects such as guns. After all, if we can't identify the obvious, how can we be expected to find the harder-to-find substances such as explosives and chemical or biological agents?

Following an incident at Washington's National Airport on Sunday 20th January this year, when a passenger realised that he had a firearm on him *after* having passed through the checkpoint and then returned to the checkpoint to declare it, a TSA spokesman stated that screeners had, "a very high rate of detecting firearms".

In this incident, the screener was removed from security duties pending (ongoing) investigation and the passenger was arrested and charged. Whilst I am not cognisant of all the facts regarding the case, unless he had intentionally tested the system, charging a passenger that has opted to heighten security by ensuring that a firearm not be taken on board an aircraft is

"...if we accept that all tests are reasonable, then 100% success should be not only desirable but essential..."

counterproductive. The next passenger will probably just count their lucky stars that it wasn't detected and board the flight.

Of greater concern is the phrase "high rate" in the TSA statement. This implies, in other words, that we are not detecting 100% of firearms. Consequently, the question is: how do we know this? There may be a minimal number of firearms that have been detected at point-of-arrival, yet these would be so few in number as to be almost irrelevant to the overall statistics. The answer actually lies in the testing carried out.

Screeners in most of the developed world are routinely tested using either Threat Image Projection (TIP), or by an off-line computer based training (CBT) system or by the insertion of test items into bags in a live environment. For these tests to be acceptable, the threat item concealed must be detectable. In other words, if it were so well concealed as to make it unreasonable for the screener to be expected to detect it, the test would be deemed unfair.

If we accept that all tests are reasonable, then 100% success should be not only

desirable but essential to have a credible aviation security system. TIP and CBT options are not computer games; they empower us to actually determine whether a screener should be employed or not.

The question then arises, what happens to screeners when they fail a test? Most authorities and employers say that they pull the person aside and provide them with "remedial training". All too often, this is a cop out – an easy way of saying that the problem has been rectified whilst allowing the systemic failure to continue unabated.

We need to instil in our screeners a fear of failure. There is rarely a second chance when it comes to security. Yet, ask around and see just how many screeners are dismissed and compare that with the widely reported governmental tests carried out (the TSA even opted to invite CNN's cameras to view a test that failed in Tampa in January this year) and it paints a rather disturbing picture. (For the record, having not seen the X-ray image of the bag in the aforementioned Washington example, I'm not suggesting that the screener in question should have been dismissed.)

It's all too easy to pick on the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia, given that (due to disproportionate media coverage focussing on the developed English-speaking world) their statistics are those most frequently bandied about. In fact, these are probably the best of the bunch. And, let's face it, at least they are testing the system!

Maybe our expectations are too low. There is continuous debate (even in this issue of ASI) as to whether our screeners should be privatised or governmental employees. For me, the key is not who they are employed by (there are excellent

examples of both), but, rather, what the calibre of those employed should be.

In most parts of the world, the calibre is certainly no match for a sophisticated terrorist group. Poorly educated, low-paid, uninspired, lacking in motivation and simply there for the pay cheque at the end of the month. We need to man our checkpoints with people with passion and, at the very least, a sense of duty, patriotism and calling.

Every day I seem to read reports of yet another criminal gang being busted at one of the world's airports. Flight attendants, screeners, engineers, baggage handlers, cleaners and even senior management appear to be involved in heists, human and narco-trafficking and illegal dealing in aircraft parts...and we're worried about the passengers at the checkpoint! Of course, there will always be corrupt exceptions and, granted the size of the aviation industry, we should expect a few bad eggs. Yet all the more reason to ensure that those safeguarding the industry are up to the task.

As an industry – aviation security as opposed to aviation – we are not very good at quality control. We say that we have audit programmes but these are nearly always pre-announced with little in the way of serious sanctions in the event of failure. Even in-house drills (and there are exceptions – you know who you are) are a rarity. We seem to be leaving it to the journalists to carry out the real covert testing.

When a B-777 crash landed at London Heathrow in January, every aviation analyst was quick to point out that, thankfully, it was a British Airways crew at the controls. Highly trained, prepared for any eventuality – quite simply, the best in the business. Not only does it appear that the landing and evacuation were carried out with aplomb, even the way in which British Airways and the British Airports Authority handled the media demonstrated a slick, rehearsed emergency programme.

Why do I mention this safety-related incident? Because globally we need to ensure that our security front-line is as highly trained and prepared for any eventuality as our safety professionals.

Years ago, one could have argued that the odd hijacking every now again was frustrating, annoying but something we could live with. Nowadays the stakes are very different – the failure of our front-line can lead to far greater loss of life than those on board a single passenger jet. The fallout can, as we have seen in Iraq, regardless as to your political view, have tragic consequences with tens of thousands dying.

We need to ensure a return on our investment. Apparently, according to a recently published report in the British Medical Journal, in the UK the BAA has spent \$41 million on airport security in the past year alone; \$15 billion has allegedly been spent by the US government between 2001 and 2005 on aviation screening and an estimated \$5.6 billion is forked out annually worldwide to protect the industry. Yet, despite this, researchers at Harvard have concluded that such expenditure has not actually enhanced the level of protection. However, I beg to differ: whilst I'm often publicly critical of our methodologies and I find many of the regulations verging on the ridiculous, Joe Public takes much solace from the screening processes he witnesses around the world. People think the system works and, with deterrent being an integral part of the security system, that's not to be snivelled at.

But (and there's a big "but"), given the huge investment, we owe it to ourselves and to the travelling public to ensure that the quality control element is in place and that we have screeners and systems that are tested and monitored. We need to be frightened of failure. We need to demand a workforce of calibre. Those we are up against do just that...

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