

# AVIATION **security** international

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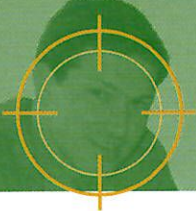
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## Qantas Hijacked: heroic crew save Tasmanian flight

by Philip Baum

By sheer coincidence, I was attending AVIATION SECURITY 2003 in Sydney only two days before David Robinson attempted to hijack Qantas flight QF 1737 bound for Launceston, Tasmania from Melbourne.

The conference, focusing almost exclusively on aviation security issues pertaining to Australia, brought together government, airline and airport representatives who debated, amongst other things, whether the threat of international terrorism was being taken seriously enough in the region. Like many conferences, I found the most useful discussions took place in the Grace Hotel's bars and restaurants...

What became evident was that the Australian carriers themselves are extremely proactive when it comes to security. Indeed it was refreshing to hear the delegates from both Qantas and Virgin Blue speak with pride about the programmes they are running and encouraging to note that, far from being complacent, they are actively researching and evaluating alternative solutions.

I had the opportunity to address the conference on the subject of crew training and my belief that passenger profiling needs to form part of aircrew training. I also tackled the topic of disruptive passenger management and advocated a team-based response. Used to being challenged on these beliefs, I was somewhat surprised to receive extremely positive feedback from the carriers themselves and boarded my Qantas flight to Singapore the following day feeling reassured.

Cruel then it seemed when, 24 hours later, news surfaced that a Qantas flight had been hijacked by a suicidal individual whilst en route to Tasmania. Even the

destination appeared unfair. The idyllic Australian island state, as far removed from the epicentre of international terrorism as is possible, was once again making the front pages for all the wrong reasons. Only seven years have elapsed since Martin Bryant massacred 35 people at Port Arthur on 28th April 1996; the worst attack by a lone gunman in modern history. We covered the event exactly two years ago as a lesson for the aviation community, ending with the words that "No airline, no airport is not a target. No airline, no airport, can claim immunity".

Qantas did not claim immunity. Quite the opposite. Qantas recognised that the airline industry is at risk from all types of threats. Accordingly, it trains its crews to manage such incidents, and manage one they did on 29th May 2003.

**'...flight attendants Greg Khan and Denise Hickson managed to prevent David Robinson gaining access to the cockpit...'**

Albeit that they required hospital treatment, flight attendants Greg Khan, aged 38, who had been stabbed severely in the head and neck and Denise Hickson (see front cover), aged 25, managed to prevent David Robinson gaining access to the cockpit, the door to which was locked but not reinforced. They, accompanied, by some willing passengers, managed to prevent a suicidal act that would have killed 53 people, let alone anybody on the ground.

David Robinson was a British-born, 40-year old, computer analyst who had left his

job some six weeks preceding the attack. The pressures upon him were great. He had recently split up with his girlfriend, who lived in Launceston, and was actually travelling to see her when he carried out the attack. He had also just returned from a trip to the United Kingdom, where he had visited his father who is reported to be terminally ill with cancer. Yet, this was not a sudden bout of air rage. His actions were, it appears, premeditated; he had managed to take two 15cm wooden stakes through the security checkpoint onto the aircraft...

Shortly after take off Robinson rose from his seat and rushed down the aisle, apparently silently, towards the cockpit. Captain Corey Purves and First Officer John Morgan initially thought a trolley had come loose and struck the cockpit door.

"Approaching 8000 feet, there was

a bump against the cockpit door, not a very significant one but there was one, and occasionally that can happen in the normal course of events because it's a very small galley area," Captain Purves said. "John and myself did subsequently hear some secondary bumps and commotion down the aisle, but of course we were not to know what was taking place at the time. We thought maybe initially a service trolley had come loose. Within 40 seconds of that initial bump, we got a call through to the cockpit and we were then made aware



that there was a security threat against the safety of the aircraft."

Once the crew had managed to restrain Robinson, he was bound with plastic ties and the aircraft returned to Melbourne.

Textbook stuff. An heroic crew. A successful outcome.

Ah but....! I know to criticise seems harsh, granted the outcome of the incident, but we must look at the lessons to be learned. And those lessons need to be learned at government level...

The Australian Protective Service has been arguing that its powers are insufficient to counter the threat to aviation. They have been requesting authority to stop and search people in terminals if they were acting suspiciously, yet legislation has yet to be passed to enable them to do so.

And the Qantas case is really almost the perfect example of our excessive reliance on metal detection technology to identify weapons concealed on the human body. Security professionals have been concerned about the threat posed by ceramic knives, glass and carbon-made weapons, let alone

wooden stakes, for years. Anybody can walk through any airport security system in the world so-armed, save for those who attempt to identify people based on their behaviour and for those involved in the tests into millimetre wave imaging and passenger X-ray technology.

very well be that there are lessons to learn out of this for Australian aviation and international aviation."

And so, like the searching of shoes after Richard Reid's attack, David Robinson's contribution may be the search for the wooden stake.

## '...security professionals have been concerned about the threat posed by ceramic knives, glass and carbon-made weapons, let alone wooden stakes...'

So, it is extremely frustrating to hear Australian Transport Minister, John Anderson, confirm that the detectors at Melbourne airport would not have indicated that Robinson was carrying a weapon and admit that "What was used could not have been picked up by a weapons detector and to this point in time we've not said to people you cannot take a piece of wood on a plane."

And, in the category of understatement of the year, he went on to say, "It may

Once again, aviation security has been compromised by others who are one step ahead of the game...and they are not all terrorists either.

All governments need to be proactive. So do airports and airlines. Qantas tries to do so and their training of Greg Khan and Denise Hickson may just have demonstrated its value in the harshest of learning environments....on a domestic flight from Melbourne to Tasmania. ☺

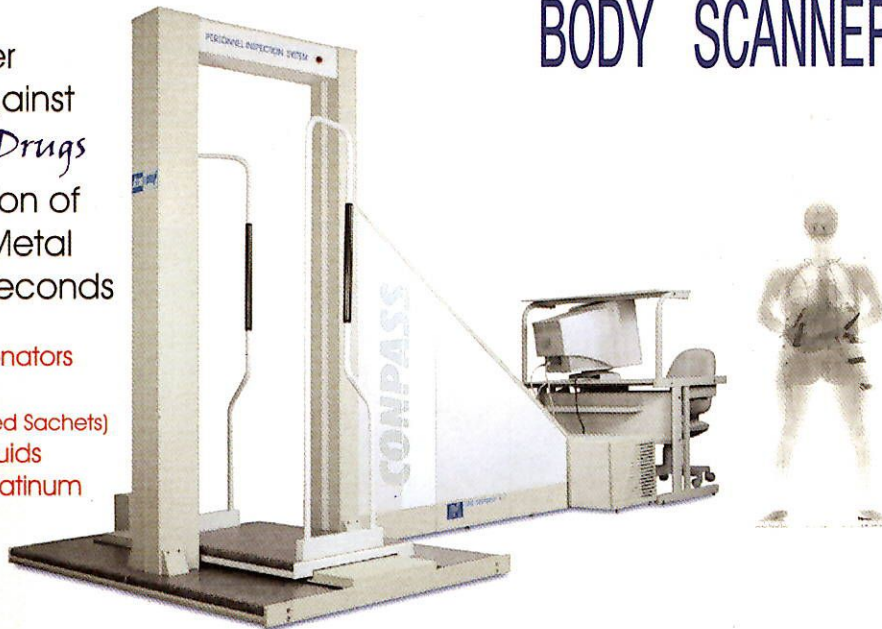


# COMPASS

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