

AVIATIONsecurity

international

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

JUNE 2006 : Volume 12 Issue 3

ISSN 352-0148 USPS 010-807



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Hoax Bomb Threats:

diverting flights, the media and our focus

By Philip Baum

It was mid-afternoon on 12th April when the phone rang. Sky News.

Often the first I hear of an aviation incident is a call from Sky. As the newswires start their chattering all the major news networks commence their search for commentators, or "experts" as they prefer to call them, who will be able to provide an inkling as to what might be going on behind the scenes.

The "experts" first used in the coverage of each incident tend to be those who either live or work in close proximity to the television or radio studio (I live about 7 kilometres from both Sky in Isleworth and BBC Television Centre) and are prepared to be picked up within minutes for their moment in the spotlight or those who can take a call on a landline until another studio guest becomes available. Recognising the importance of the media and the oxygen of publicity it provides (for both them and I alike), I like to don the makeup whenever I can! There are, however, exceptions to that rule.

It was Sky News that broke the news to me of the first plane hitting the World Trade Centre on 11th September 2001. Strangely enough, I was actually on the phone to Sky at the moment of impact as they were trying to persuade me to come into the studio to talk about "new evidence" in the Lockerbie case! Yes, Pan Am 103 was the subject of the lead story of the United Kingdom's Daily Mirror newspaper that day.

Commenting on "sensational new evidence" relating to an incident that had taken place almost 13 years previously fell into my definition of "exceptions to the rule". I am not a policeman, have no inside knowledge of the investigation, knew none

"finding a note in a restroom with the word 'BOMB' on it now warrants a fighter escort to the nearest airport"

of the parties concerned and am somewhat sceptical about the headlines of certain British newspapers. I was not an "expert", I told them, even by their standards. I recall saying, "have you nothing better to report on today?"

At that moment, the lady responsible for guest bookings informed me that an aircraft had hit the World Trade Centre. Now, for sure I was going to want to come in she said. My response was negative. "I'm not a pilot and know little about avionics. If a light aircraft has gone off course, I'm not your man." I put the phone down but, with my interest piqued on this human interest story, I called up the CNN website. As I did so, the phone rang again...and again...and again. Within minutes I was on my way to Isleworth and quickly ferried onto the Sky News studio floor without pausing for makeup. Here was a story that I could comment on...

Since that day, I get a lump in my throat every time the media call. "Hi Philip, it's Sky News here..." is enough to get my serious attention. After all, the likelihood of another aviation atrocity is very real. None of us knows where or when it will occur. All we do know is that it will, sometime, somewhere in the not too distant future.

So, on 12th April this year, heading home early to spend time with my family on my birthday, I took my traditional gulp on answering Sky's call. "OK, what's happened", I said. "A Ryanair aircraft, en route to Dublin from France, has been diverted to

Prestwick. Apparently there may be a bomb on board. Are you available to come into the studio?" Cue "exception to the rule" number 2! Bomb threats!

In all honesty, I did agree to a quick telephone interview, conducted in my car outside my house. I felt the need to try to downplay the story and that by going to the television studio I would simply be stoking the flames of a non-event.

Sure, for those on board, it was anything but a non-event. Being told that you are diverting for security reasons is understandably a cause for concern. Splashing it across the headlines, however, simply plays into the hands of those disturbed individuals who enjoy disrupting people's lives as a pastime.

Bomb threats are a daily occurrence. Indeed, some carriers can, themselves, tally up a number of bomb threats on a single day. Most are dismissed as being non-specific and warrant little attention. It is, however, all too easy to ensure that a bomb threat be regarded as specific.

Whilst I would never recommend assuming that a bomb threat is a hoax (we all know that assuming is a big "no no" in the security business), some of the reactions to them do seem somewhat excessive. As I compile the "Air Watch" section of this journal, I find myself regularly stunned by the overreactions of many of the security agencies around the world and the unquestioned expense of some of the responses.

Seemingly, finding a note in a restroom with the word "BOMB" on it now warrants a fighter escort to the nearest airport! And just what is that fighter going to do?

Meanwhile, many of our flight attendant colleagues seem to have succumbed to paranoia par excellence. In the last six weeks, we have had one aircraft land shortly after take off after a passenger overheard another passenger saying "we're going up" on the moment of take off; we've had one Italian woman with a headache say "I have a bomb on my mind" in English, only to find herself to be the cause of an aircraft evacuation; and, we've had Portuguese speaking helicopter pilots detained on arrival for reading flight manuals.

Do we really believe that a terrorist is going to write a warning note in lipstick on the mirror in the restroom? Is the next group of suicidal pilots going to do their final bit of research into aircraft avionics on board? Will an intelligent (most people well versed in IED construction have a reasonable quantity of brain cells) individual, terrorist or otherwise, suddenly opt to leave a warning message, that might or might not be acted upon, on a sick bag?

I'm not suggesting we ignore every bomb threat. Those telephoned in have, on occasions, been found to be genuine - an explosion was prevented in Biarritz Airport on 13th April thanks to the security forces responding appropriately to such a call. I'm also not suggesting we ignore suspicious behaviour. However, we must understand that a genuine bomb threat usually provides us with enough information either to be able to determine the location of the device or to enable us to associate the caller with a known cause whose activists might resort to such action.

The presenters, on all British news networks, certainly seemed taken by the Prestwick diversion. Where will the aircraft be parked? Surely, they'll have to evacuate the airport in case the plane explodes? How dangerous will it be for the bomb squad? How much danger are the passengers in? Might the aircraft be shot down? No wonder they need some "experts"...

If only there was as much media coverage of the daily incidents that really do endanger aviation. The endless number of disruptive passenger stories, now a way of life for

"the excessive screening of obviously regular passengers through the removal of laptops, camcorders, coins, belts and shoes is a virus that seems to be spreading rapidly around the globe"

certain European Supermodels bent on self-destruction. The runway incursions by trade union workers demonstrating against government policy or employer cutbacks, now seemingly in vogue in South America. The intoxicated drivers who seem to be crashing through perimeter fences onto runways with disturbing frequency, espe-

cially in Japan. And, last but by no means least, the excessive screening of obviously regular passengers through the removal of laptops, camcorders, coins, belts and shoes, a virus that seems to be spreading rapidly around the globe that is far more threatening to aviation security than many of the bomb threats we have responded to.

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