

TWA *ergate!*

There is an international disparity in standards of airport and airline security of that, there is no argument. **Philip Baum** discusses some of the more alarming differences, especially those that apply to US carriers.

In the aftermath of the disaster

that struck TWA flight 800 on July 17 following its departure from New York's Kennedy airport, the whole issue of aviation security has once again been placed high upon the international agenda. For the United States, realising that the catastrophe could have been caused by a terrorist act, the situation is all the more dire and the implications to its federal aviation security programme cause for considerable concern. There has, traditionally, been one set of procedures for flights departing America and another, more stringent set, for inbound flights of US carriers due to the acceptance of the myth of Europe being the playground for the international terrorist. The Atlanta bombing, albeit not aviation related, was proof, if ever it were needed, that terrorists attack the weak link in the chain, for the target there was not one of the highly protected Olympic sporting venues but the unprotected Centennial Park.

TW800 has generated incessant questioning from the media, the general public and even the industry itself. Was it a bomb? What about catastrophic engine failure? A missile? Who could have been responsible? How can security be by-passed? Why TWA? Why now? And for all these questions and more we, in the industry, can speculate and make intelligent observations, yet the harsh reality is that the aviation industry alone can only do so much to prevent terrorist outrages, the rest must come from government. For me, the question is who is responsible for security in the skies?

The United States has taken the stance that the burden should be placed on the airlines themselves. To be cynical, the rationale for this could be that to offer an acceptable level of security would be so unpopular with the American public, as it would necessitate a restriction on the individual's civil liberties, that no government would wish to implement sufficient screening procedures for fear of damaging its electoral hopes. More worrying is the fact that maybe a scapegoat

is needed due to a realisation that nobody can offer any guarantees in this area. The fact is that federal government knows that the quality of security offered in the United States is insufficient; the Federal Aviation Administration's own prescribed procedures overseas, where they do not permit US carriers to rely on x-ray screening and baggage reconciliation alone, indicate as much. Why demand a profile system if you believe x-rays detect bombs?

It's time now to stop the double standards and to start taking the threat to aviation in America seriously. It's time for the federal government to provide travellers with a security programme of substance. Can you imagine the public outcry if national security was to be placed in the hands of private security companies rather than the military? Or if responsibility for neighbourhood protection was taken away from the police? Terrorism is not the fault of the airlines. If Germany decides to release Dalkamoni from gaol and return him to Syria or, if America decides to extradite Hamas activists to Israel or to imprison Islamic fundamentalist leaders or, if extremist militia groups are permitted to play army games, why should the airlines pay the price? On entry to the United States passengers are subject to the scrutiny of two government agencies, INS (Immigration and Naturalisation Service) and US Customs. So why, on departure does the government opt out? Instead our lives are entrusted to minimum wage employees of security companies determined to win airline contracts in an exceptionally competitive environment.

Companies providing the security to American carriers in Europe will vouch for the fact that price has become the all-important factor whereas, post-Lockerbie, quality security was the order of the day. Ironically, TWA's own subsidiary security company, IAS (International Aviation Security), has been one of the least willing to compromise its standards for excessive industry demands for a more customer-ser-

X-rays on their own are not enough. This technology must be used as part of an overall security process which is designed to present the potential bomber with a number of obstacles to placing a bomb on an aircraft.

vice-oriented approach. IAS has tried, despite strong competition, to maintain its extended training programme and implements procedures that go above and beyond the standard requirements of the FAA. This attitude was formed not only at headquarters but by the employees in the field whose task it is to ensure the safety of departing flights.

Any American carrier that decides, independently, to implement a more comprehensive screening of its passengers, baggage or aircraft is embarking on a route to financial ruin. Passengers do not want to have to check-in an hour and a half before their flight departure and they will select a carrier that offers the most hassle-free service. The general public do not appreciate that quality security is a form of customer service until its too late. As a result of this one is left with the farcical situation whereby on domestic US flights there is little to prevent an aircraft bombing - no hold baggage screening and no baggage reconciliation. It's not an area that can be left to self-regulation. Many carriers do not have the computer systems necessary to effect a positive passenger-bag match programme and they know that keeping ground times to a minimum increases earning potential. Lives are put at risk as a result. If there were no choice and the same procedures were in effect for all passengers on all carriers, mandated by central government, as in the case of INS or US Customs, then and only then can one start to develop an effective security programme where customer service plays second fiddle to security. All departing flights from Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport, be they scheduled or charter, Israeli or foreign,

are subject to a standard level of security. Elsewhere, airport operators provide security services funded out of landing fees with all carriers receiving the "basic service" which they are free to supplement with their own procedures, as in the case of American carriers departing from Europe.

I'm not suggesting that airlines abdicate all responsibility for security to the government or airport operator. Only the carriers can ensure 100% baggage reconciliation is effected, although government should mandate it. Only they can ensure their crews are trained to handle hijacks or the discovery of an explosive device in-flight. And only they can ensure that their schedulers allow sufficient ground time for screening procedures to be carried out, although government will have to determine minimum turn around times for different aircraft types which would be enforced in the event of a delayed inbound flight, slot time or no slot time to meet.

The Israeli approach is not necessarily the solution. It may, arguably, be the best but it is, of course, completely impractical for the United States to venture down such a path. The airports are not suited architecturally to its implementation, the number of flights prohibits it and the level of threat may be considered such not to warrant it. That said, total reliance on technology is not the solution either. X-ray machines have limited capabilities of identifying an explosive device, unless of course one really expects the international terrorist to place a pipe bomb in the middle of a suitcase that is known to be subject to x-ray examination! The man in the street and, I'm afraid, at times even airline industry employees tend to place total faith in the x-ray machine. How many times has one heard people, who should know better, when faced with a security dilemma state "but the bag was x-rayed" and take no further action? Such an approach indicates either a lack of security training or the results of brain-washing by the manufacturers, the media and the government. To make matters worse, the tendency is to place x-ray machines in baggage make-up areas, rather than the check-in, so that even if an operator has doubts there is a natural reluctance to summon the passenger to open a bag. The CTX-5000 is probably the most sophisticated equipment currently available but it will take time until they are affordable and installed in anything like the numbers necessary to safeguard aviation internationally. Further still, the CTX is dependant upon high-calibre operators who are under pressure to keep the reject rate to a minimum so that a bomb in a bag following a sequence of bags set aside for search can still get through the system.

The solution, for the time being at least, lies with the security agent as the human brain must still be a cog in the screening process. Despite all the reluctance to accept the passenger profiling system there



is a way, which I obviously cannot be specific about here, in which a modified profile system, incorporating the use of technology, can be implemented without causing massive queues and without resorting to invasive Israeli tactics. Profiling, regrettably, is often misunderstood and seen as an all or nothing method. And for the sake of those who had any doubt, only asking a passenger if he packed the bag himself and whether or not he was given anything to take with him, is not passenger profiling - try asking Abu Nidal!

Times have changed. No longer is the threat a lone gunman diverting an aircraft to Havana where the incident itself was a means to an end. Now the target is America. If American citizens are flying on American carriers and are being considered as legitimate targets, then the American government must respond in person and not sub-contract their responsibilities. Security needs to be proactive and substantive. The industry does not need rhetoric, conferences can call for a spirit of co-operation between nations but precise procedures are what will actually prevent terrorist outrages. President Clinton can ask for each and every aircraft cabin on all international flights of US carriers to be searched, but why limit it to international? Is the threat not present for domestic flights? Or, maybe we just have to wait and

The TW 800 incident has led to a massive Federal budget request to help fund a number of new security measures. Is technology of a fundamental change in philosophy required?

respond to an attack only when it eventually happens?

Britain is investing heavily in technology and appears to buy more American equipment than the Americans do themselves. Manchester Airport can be proud of the fact that it receives visitors from around the world wishing to see the latest technology in action. The BAA too has taken enormous strides to provide travellers with an impressive and effective screening process aided by the professional approach demonstrated by their employees when carrying out their duties. Much of this is due to reasonable levels of pay and the positive, security-minded, approach of the United Kingdom's Department of Transport.

Elsewhere in Europe, in the Far East, Africa and South America governments view aviation terrorism as being their responsibility. Yet in such places we find American FAA inspectors travelling around passing judgement as to the level of security in effect at any given airport. America -



the world's policeman on patrol! One almost felt that, following the TWA disaster, the American authorities were secretly praying that the bomb, if it were one, was loaded in Athens so that Europe could once again be to blame and that the security lapses in New York could be placed in the pending file. The FAA's inspectors, R&D personnel and liaison officers all provide an excellent service and few would complain if only their bosses in Washington would take the threat at home more seriously.

Somehow the airline industry itself needs to use its powers to force government into action. Government, in return, needs to be specific about the measures that it mandates its carriers to implement and to ensure that such procedures, whilst taking the threat level into consideration, are both well-balanced and justifiable. There is a strong case for the aviation security industry to self-regulate by setting a minimum level of pay to ensure that employees of sufficient calibre are attracted to the industry and can play their role in ensuring safety in the skies. Airport security is not the same as guarding a building site and it's time there were some appreciation of that fact. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the United States, the new arena for international terrorism.

The author is Managing Director of Green Light Ltd, a London-based aviation security training company specialising in Hijack Management, Passenger Profiling and Threat Appreciation courses. He was formerly Manager of Training & Auditing of TWA's security subsidiary.

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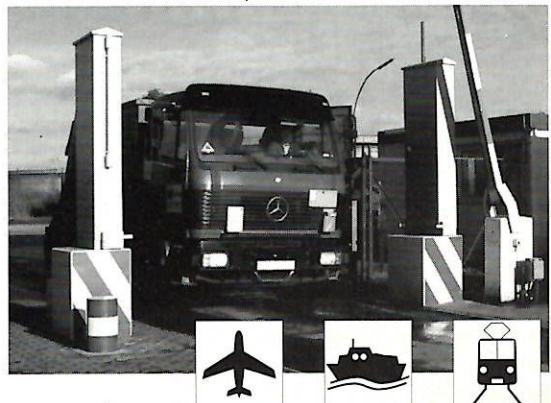
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Rados Technology GmbH - Strahlungsmeßtechnik
 Ruhrstraße 49, 22761 Hamburg/Postfach 50 12 45, 22712 Hamburg
 Telefon: (x-49-40) 85 193 - 0, Telefax: (x-49 40) 85 193 - 256

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